

Communities of Judgment and Fan Citizenship: Challenging Univocality, Cynicism, and
Isolation Among Viewers of *The West Wing*

Brett Boessen

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Doctoral Committee

John Lucaites Ph.D.

Christopher Anderson, Ph.D.

Barbara Klinger, Ph.D.

Ann Mongoven, Ph.D.

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For Kate, Lilly, and Will

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Abstract:

Television viewers of NBC's *The West Wing* respond to the series in a multitude of situated ways that underscore the nature of contemporary U.S. politics and the need for continued study of the relationship between media forms and their consumers. Ethnographically informed analysis of the rhetorical features of responses by the program's producers, print journalists who write about the series, and online fans indicates viewers are anxious about the relationships among quality television, political realism, entertainment, and political participation, but find different ways to address these anxieties in their public discourse. The visual economy of representations in the program and producers' univocal ancillary promotional materials encourage identification of the series as a quality television program that attracts affluent and educated viewers. Journalists and critics formulate responses that indicate an underlying idealism about the aesthetics of television and its relationship to politics, though they are often voiced in a register of cynicism. Online fans in internet newsgroups write of the series both as an object of fandom and as a resource for understanding contemporary politics in their daily lives, often intermingling the two. Their roles as fans and as citizens are frequently blended through their implementation of practical knowledge and judgment as opposed to strictly logical frameworks. All of these groups constitute communities of judgment in which the focus on a central object for evaluation and

assessment allows for a greater tolerance of dissent. This tends to stave off the social fragmentation and isolation some contemporary social critics have lamented. Because journalists and online fans identify with the series as fans and as citizens simultaneously, they more readily blur the boundaries between fiction and fact and entertainment and politics. This tends to encourage recognition of novel connections and discourage disengagement with other citizens and fans who have fundamental disagreements.

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Chapter 1

Engaging the Screen, Engaging Each Other: "The West Wing" and Its Viewers

What would bring a person to spend hours voluntarily submitting to the ideology of her opponent? What is to be gained from immersing oneself in another's argument if it contradicts one's own point of view on the world? Imagine a pro-life advocate opting to spend an hour every week listening to public readings of a novel in which a pro-choice advocate is the primary protagonist. This is certainly curious (unless we understand the listener to be involved in reconnaissance). One would find it even more odd if the listener participated in discussion groups organized around those public readings, and would consider it absolutely strange if, when she did voice her own opinion, it was anything other than disdainful. And yet, this is in some way what fans of *The West Wing* do constantly in online fan sites and the *West Wing* newsgroup. Literally hundreds of posts a week are written by fans of the show who identify it as "liberal" while identifying themselves as "conservative." They are often overtly acerbic rants against what they see as the show's ideological slant, but they are also frequently more complex, attending closely to the values of the show's protagonists and relating them to personal situations and experience.

Consider the following example of one viewer's response to the series. When President Jeb Bartlet (played by Martin Sheen) rails against a Republican opponent during a presidential election, the challenger is left looking dumb. One viewer posted to alt.tv.the-west-wing, "I'm all for poetic license, but couldn't they have come up with a better comeback for Ritchie?"¹ This online group participant appears to find the episode unrealistic in the

¹ This is in reference to the 4th season episode "Game On," in which President Bartlet, one of the protagonists of the show and a liberal President up for reelection, debates Governor Ritchie of Florida for the first and only time. In this debate, Bartlet, a New England Democrat, rebuts Ritchie, a Republican from the South, who claims Bartlet's administration is bloated. Bartlet points out Florida's 12.6 million dollars in federal aid in the

sense of being untrue to the world of professional politics or to the medium of television and the genre of hour-long primetime drama. Perhaps the author even finds this aspect of the show directly in conflict with his or her own personal values. Whether it is politics or more “realistic” fiction, this behavior is not what some prominent perspectives on media, rhetoric, and communication would predict, because it indicates that media consumers neither wholeheartedly and uncritically absorb the content of media messages they consume nor even necessarily organize themselves easily into “image tribes” of univocal consumer constituencies.² As I discuss in greater detail below, whether these theories emit from cultural conservatives like Allan Bloom and William Bennett, from critics of the television industry like Neil Postman and Robert W. McChesney, or from social capital theorists like Robert Putnam and Cass Sunstein, they draw at least one conclusion in common: television audiences easily succumb to a medium that encourages them to move apart instead of come together, especially if they are likely to disagree. By contrast, I argue in the following chapters that *West Wing* viewers maintain a strong sense of individual identity, which they bring to their interactions with the series and other viewers with an unpredictable zeal. While audience activity has been more or less roundly accepted by contemporary media theorists and has been traditionally assumed by rhetoricians beginning with Aristotle, the specific form of that activity in the case of *The West Wing* is diverse and arguably unique to the specific contexts in which it has arisen and been maintained. I show that these specific forms vary among the variety of *West Wing* viewer communities in complex ways.

previous year and asks, “Can we have it back?” Ritchie is allowed no rebuttal in the episode: instead, the scene cuts to Bartlet’s staff watching from backstage, who variously comment on his skill. From “Can We Have It Back, Please?” Query,” alt.tv.the-west-wing, first accessed Nov 02, <<http://groups.google.com/groups>>.

² From Joseph Turow’s *Breaking Up America* (1999).

Reactions that resist stereotypical expectations are not restricted to those opposed to the program's political viewpoint, either, but are arguably more nuanced. Some viewers who identify with both the series and its representations of politics indicate both attraction and repulsion toward the opportunity to identify with strong images of contemporary American liberal ideology, but also away from their sense of an overly fantastic contour of each week's narrative. For example, during its first season in 1999, many journalists took the opportunity to point out what they saw as significant contradictions in tone and address. Throughout its run, the series has drawn critics' ire for simultaneously taking a strong stance on traditional Democratic issues and at the same time waxing "sappy" and saccharine in expressing characters' reasons for maintaining their fervor for those issues. Online, fans metaphorically pull out their hair every time a character leaves out what they perceive to be a significant detail of the Democratic platform or fails to rebut a Republican vehemently enough. Such responses suggest there is more to the ways media circulate in contemporary U.S. culture than previous conceptions have suggested. The medium is only part of the message after all: while the structure of the series certainly shapes reactions to it, the variety of responses I describe invite a much more complex understanding of the processes through which audiences interact with media representations. This prompts my initial research question: Why are many responses to *The West Wing* laced with anxieties about its politics, its realism, and its quality?

I argue that the specific forms of the activities at work among *West Wing* viewers represent practical responses to the uncertainties of everyday life, particularly as they relate to questions of individual judgments about politics. Responses to the program are, first, specifically articulated with and by the processes of rhetorical identification encouraged by

the program's text.³ I demonstrate some of the ways representations in the show actively seek to shape viewers' interpretations. Second, viewer responses also articulate a more general approach to consumption of media texts in daily life. In response to the more halcyon expressions of fan activity, scholars have argued that rosy views of fan practices need to be qualified by studies of what audiences actually do with media texts.⁴ Consistent with this critique, I show how instead of rabidly defending "their show" against all outside attacks, fans of *The West Wing* have been more likely to maintain a vigorous debate about precisely those elements—like the aesthetic and political effectiveness of the show—that more simplistic approaches to fandom might not predict.⁵ One significant thread of this project seeks to address how self-professed fans and more-than-casual viewers take on and struggle with the ideological positions represented in and expressed by the show. I show that this activity is not isolated, but is constantly revisited, reexamined, and reapplied following the airing of each new episode.

However, understanding the specific forms of fan activity among *West Wing* viewers requires something more fundamental to the processes of identification with the show these specific viewers enact. In order to elaborate on this second problem, consider a second example of a viewer response. In April of 2001, after George W. Bush had been in office for

³ On the topic of identification in rhetorical studies, see Kenneth Burke's *A Rhetoric of Motives* (19-28).

⁴ For example, Henry Jenkins' brightest expression of this is in *Textual Poachers* (54-60); another good example is *Television Culture* by John Fiske (62-83). Among the scholars who tend to agree with Jenkins and Fiske about audience activity but still wish to push some of their assumptions are Matthew Hill in *Fan Cultures* (xii; I discuss some of his specific critiques in more depth below) and David Morley in *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies* (especially in Part II, in which he analyzes his earlier work on *Nationwide*, 119-130).

⁵ Jenkins and Fiske are not straw men. Jenkins discusses the ways fans argue with their show's structure and scope at some length in *Textual Poachers*, and Fiske discusses the activity of viewers throughout *Television Culture*. Instead, I show the status of the conversation on viewer activity as one still being formulated, in which a variety of scholars approach its key questions from different perspectives with different emphases. What Jenkins and Fiske both undoubtedly do express in their work is an exuberance for the power of audience practices. In what follows I interrogate the extent to which such exuberance is justified in the case of *West Wing* viewers.

a few months and *The West Wing* had almost completed its second season, a participant of alt.tv.the-west-wing (an online discussion forum about the show) posted a comment about the possibility that President Bartlet's admission of having multiple sclerosis might turn into a narrative thread involving impeachment.⁶ As the first post in a thread by fans interested in speculating on future episodes, this comment is similar to thousands of posts found on fan websites and discussion forums every week. It takes little time, though, for the thread to turn to considerations of actual presidential ethical missteps, as in its third post, which raises questions about President George W. Bush's drinking and rumored cocaine habit. By introducing actual events as a direct response to a question about fictional representations, this third post in the thread opens up a much greater variety of interactions. More importantly, such an introduction raises a new, communal problem for group participants to adjudicate: what is the extent of the relationship between the actual *West Wing* and the fictional one? This question arises not as abstract theorizing but rather as a concrete question to be answered, not once and for all, but for this particular thread, at this particular time, in the constantly changing and evolving space of the virtual community that is alt.tv.the-west-wing. As Chapter 4 indicates, this particular thread becomes a kind of referendum for group participants on both the relationship among fact, fiction, and opinion, as well as what is appropriate in this particular newsgroup regarding the introduction of actual events.

In this exchange, a handful of alt.tv.the-west-wing participants find an opportunity to interpret the relationship between the medium of television and the realm of contemporary U.S. politics in a practical and highly contextualized way. Group participants have constituted a community in which they intertwine aesthetic and political judgment as a means

⁶ I discuss this thread in much greater detail in Chapter 4. The reader will find the full text of the individual posts in question there also.

to better understand their roles as both fans and citizens and the implications of not easily resolving the tensions between the two. I argue that viewers respond to *The West Wing* in a variety of contextualized ways, based on their professional and personal identities, their participation in different communities, their association with different institutions, and their individual political affiliations and orientations. I consider three relatively distinct (though interrelated) groups of “viewers.”

First, as media production specialists affiliated with the television industry, *The West Wing*’s *producers* view the series through a set of largely commercial lenses that inform not only the ways they speak and write about it, but also the specific visual economy in which the program’s representations are cast. These producers are driven by a keen attention to whether and to what extent *The West Wing* matches an industrial conception of “quality television” promoted primarily because of its perceived close connections to elite demographics. But they also work to align that sense of “quality” with a specific kind of realism paradoxically predicated on a mostly idealized conception of the federal government and U.S. politics. *The West Wing*’s producers view it both aesthetically and politically as a program for only certain types of viewers with certain tastes.⁷ The community these media professionals constitute is oriented toward constant reevaluation of the series both as good political drama and as “quality television.” However, institutional imperatives and economic pressures tend to constrain their reactions to social and political changes.

Second, professional *print journalists and television critics* approach the show with a different set of motivations apparent in the way they write about it. At once both professionally affiliated with the media industry and disconnected from the process of

⁷ I discuss in the “Program Overview” below my reasons for extending terms like “viewer” and “response” to the series’ producers.

television production itself, these viewers consistently express concern about the role of the series as a site for cultural production in two important ways. First, they attend to and debate the show's status as "quality television," vigorously (and sometimes vehemently) questioning and critiquing that status in the columns of their articles. Second, they worry about the propriety of the program's "realism," especially as it pertains to a "blurring of the boundary" between fiction and fact. These anxieties manifest themselves in a variety of ways, but they are always suffused with a deep cynicism, about politics and popular culture in general, but also about the specific form of the relationship between them. Their community is located at an intersection between production and consumption.

Third, self-avowed *fans* of the series also find numerous ways to voice their identification with it. When we consider the activities of this particular group of fans—the participants of alt.tv.the-west-wing—we find an active community of *West Wing* viewers who address the series not only as a vehicle for producing other benefits or as an object to be critiqued (though these are also important aspects for fans), but more importantly, as a constantly rejuvenating resource, a wellspring of specific arguments in the form of weekly episodes about the nature of contemporary American politics.

Communities of Judgment and Fan Citizenship

Each of these groups formulates their responses to the series in ways that can be understood as particular kinds of community. Though they are inflected differently in each group, the prominence of their communities as sites for the production of aesthetic and political judgment serves to help community participants manage the tensions between being fans and citizens. I call these kinds of groups "communities of judgment." Participants in each community strive for their own idealized conception of fandom and citizenship, but are

constrained in particular ways by their context of consumption. Producers' drive for profit seems to eclipse their willingness to maintain a space for dissent. Journalists' cynicism and anxieties about the relationships between fiction and reality and entertainment and politics promote maintenance of a stark boundary that discourages imaginative responses to contemporary problems. Online fans' choice of the internet as their primary channel of communication prompts a series of interpersonal challenges which they must actively overcome.

However, within each community one can recognize a particular style of public communication that has emerged out of the contemporary, postmodern mediated age. I call this style "fan citizenship," a contemporary rhetorical blend of media consumer and citizen that allows more effective articulation of the complex, mediated social environment in which we now deliberate as citizens of a representative democracy. The fan citizen is more tolerant of dissent, especially when it is passionately enacted, encourages fellowship, and tends to be less anxious about maintaining rigid boundaries between conceptual realms like fiction and reality or politics and entertainment.

Each of the three groups of viewers I consider in this project brings something to the discourse in understanding the role of *The West Wing* as a site of cultural production. Each can be understood as a community actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning. However, their approaches to that production are different, marked by the differentiated activities in which they participate. There are four relatively distinct but intimately related approaches to interpreting *The West Wing* animated by and between these three viewing communities. Aesthetically, approaches are dominated by questions of quality and realism. Politically, questions center on cynicism and tactics. None of these four

approaches can be encountered in isolation, but rather they all articulate with one another rhetorically in a variety of ways depending on the specific circumstances involved in when, where, and by whom they are deployed.

In terms of aesthetics, the most common approaches are to consider whether *The West Wing* counts as “quality television” and whether it is “realistic.” Attention to the first in public discourse serves the needs of each community: producers, because building *The West Wing* as quality television helps to organize potential audiences through disciplined visual motifs and by extension more productively produce profit; television journalists and critics, because they have become the gatekeepers of the medium of television itself; fans, because identifying the program as quality television allows fans to achieve a small amount of critical distance from the rest of television. Second, approaching the program through the critical lens of realism serves their needs because of the way realism has tended to articulate with and amplify quality television with positive valences: the more realistic a program can be argued to be, the more readily it has been accepted as quality television. This works in particular ways with specific effects, and as such is not necessarily open to all instances of realism or moments that strike a viewer as real.

As an object of political discussion, there are also two distinct approaches commonly found among viewer responses: a cynical approach, as observable evidence about why contemporary American politics might be suspect or even bankrupt, but also what I call a tactical approach, as one of a number of resources for political judgment within a community. In particular, political realism implicates the fan’s parallel role as a citizen in need of resources to assist in making political judgments. By political realism, I mean how and to what extent the series represents contemporary U.S. politics “accurately,” according to

the attitudes of the various actors involved in its articulation. As one moves away from the center of power and control vested in producers and encounters the poaching techniques of some journalists and most fans, one sees *West Wing* viewers drawing connections between aesthetic questions of quality and realism, and politically cynical and tactical approaches to the program via an on-going intermingling of politics and entertainment, democracy and capitalism, and fiction and reality.

To be a fan citizen is not only to recognize, but to relish the inextricable relationship between culture and politics. That relationship is fraught with a host of fissures, slippages, and entrenched cultural articulations, but it is precisely at these points of disjuncture that fan citizens find footholds with which to gain new perspectives that allow them to make judgments about politics in their daily lives. For example, the visual economy of the program informs the ways viewers understand its position in the political landscape. Some viewers argue the series represents politics as overly sentimental and go on to imply it is therefore useless as a rhetorical tool for serious politics. Others argue the program's narratives blur the lines between fiction and reality in politics too heavily and are therefore dangerous to citizens. And still others ask whether we can learn about actual politics through a fictional show, and whether we should. All of these issues and the debates they engender should be understood as important dimensions of the real struggle over the meaning of politics in contemporary U.S. culture.

This struggle has its most evident articulation in public discourse in the notion of "quality television" itself, a special moniker for a certain category of television more palatable to viewers seeking to distinguish themselves from the mass of undifferentiated audiences (and by extension more palatable to advertisers and television producers). In the

case of *The West Wing*, the ability to sustain membership in the elite club of quality television is fundamental to understanding such status as a source text for *West Wing* viewers. According to a variety of conceptions of quality television, *The West Wing* merits that membership, though what viewers gain (and also give up) through their active encouragement of that membership are key questions whose answers are central to understanding how the fan citizen traverses contemporary cultural terrain. We can begin to explore these questions by considering the cultural history of conceptions of quality television in the United States.

Wherefore Art Thou Popular?—Is “Quality Television” an Oxymoron?

All television viewers, as media consumers, participate in the exchange, or circulation, of meaning.⁸ The representations that constitute the corpus of a particular program reveal patterns of force indicating preferred readings of the text for those viewers. In the case of *The West Wing*, these representations, taken together with public relations materials circulated by the program’s producers, tend to invite a specific audience, namely affluent viewers with high amounts of disposable income.⁹ In addition, there has been a clear effort by its producers to present the fictional *West Wing* as materially similar to the actual *West Wing*, also in the service of shoring up the sense that *The West Wing* could be considered nothing if not quality television by viewers. In order to understand the specific practices at work among *West Wing* viewers, we need to know something about the specific practices at work among producers. While producers are notoriously tight-fisted about

⁸ For a more in-depth consideration of the “Circuit of Culture,” see du Gay, et al., 1-5.

⁹ I discuss ancillary materials in later chapters. Briefly, they include the official website for the series (nbc.com/The_West_Wing) and the printed interviews with members of the production team, including the cast, producers, writers, and creator.

releasing so-called industry secrets,¹⁰ a combination of textual analysis of *The West Wing* itself and close analysis of public relations materials can still shed some light on the nature of producers' attitudes toward their product.

I focus in Chapter 2 on those specific elements of the visual economy enacted in the program (shaped by its producers) that encourage identification with a discerning, educated and ultimately affluent audience. These elements of *The West Wing*'s representations draw heavily on a notion of the series as "quality television." That term has been in use for at least twenty years, and it would be hard to assess the responses of any *West Wing* viewer group, much less the rhetorical constructions of its producers, without consideration of the work on quality television in the United States during that time.¹¹ In addition, any interpretation of the ways *West Wing* viewers understand the power and validity of the series must begin with an assessment of the role of the concept of "quality television."

Scholarly work on what the phrase "quality television" might mean for producers and consumers has been active since at least 1984, when Jane Feuer, et al. published *MTM: Quality Television*, a collection of essays on MTM Enterprises. This volume marks the beginning of the scholarly discussion about "quality" when applied to television. However, little is ever actually argued in that book about what quality television is, other than that MTM Enterprises was a new phenomenon among network television production, and that this newness stemmed from its style and sophistication (Feuer 36). In this work, the quality audience was a relatively specific demographic: a liberal, sophisticated group of upwardly

¹⁰ While media scholars like Todd Gitlin (*Inside Primetime*) and Keith Negus (*Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*) have managed to gain access to industry insiders, these studies are most notable as exceptions to the rule of limited or non access to contemporary production discourses.

¹¹ I specify work "in the United States" because "quality television" in the U.K. is a much deeper and ultimately more important term for British scholars than for scholars in the U.S. Little if any work has been done on why the term has such greater cachet in the U.K., but the evidence is clear.

mobile professionals. The audience of a quality series views it as more literate, stylistically complex, and with greater psychological depth than others (56). While many *West Wing* viewers have argued this is how they understand the show, there have been some changes in the ways we tend to understand notions of a “quality” audience today.

For example, Robert Thompson published *Television’s Second Golden Age* in 1996, over a decade after the Feuer compilation. In that time, “quality” was used to describe mostly hour-long dramas like *St. Elsewhere*, *Hill Street Blues*, and *L.A. Law*. Thompson seeks to identify what exactly quality television means to journalists and those in the media industry who use the term. His work is a history and discussion of the ways television producers have tended to use “quality,” and it is rooted in the assertion that it is not an aesthetic determination—as perhaps Feuer would contend—but an identification of a unique genre of television. In his preface, Thompson profiles twelve elements of quality: 1) It is not “regular” TV; 2) quality TV producers are pedigreed; they have reputations, often from other media; 3) its viewers have “blue chip demographics”; 4) despite such demographics, quality television struggles in the ratings and against the profit margins of its network; 5) it has an ensemble cast; 6) it has a memory; 7) it creates new genres by mixing old ones; 8) it is literary and writer-based; 9) it is self-conscious; 10) it tends toward the controversial (and is “liberal”); 11) it aspires toward realism; and 12) it is showered with awards and acclaim.

His list makes sense, as most lists of generic elements do, if we understand it less as a delineation of necessary criteria and more as a cluster of sufficient elements.¹² Nonetheless, it adequately maps many of the salient elements of the series Thompson cites as quality television, and as such is comprehensible. With regard to *The West Wing*, we will see in

¹² See Naremore, “Film Noir: The History of An Idea” (14, 24) for an argument for why this is a more useful way to think about genre.

Chapter 2 that many of these criteria are at least perceived by most of the program's producers as fundamental aspects of the series.

However, several changes have occurred in the realm of television production in the decade since Thompson's history was written. For example, in his closing chapter he discusses his doubts concerning the ability of hour-long dramas to achieve adequate syndication given the nature of television in the 1990s. Since that time, however, cable networks like TNT, A&E, and FX have developed a marketing strategy that has incorporated hour-long, quality television programming. Further, *Law and Order*, *ER*, and *NYPD Blue*, each specifically mentioned by Thompson as the future of quality television and unlikely to do well in syndication, can be seen regularly on cable. Bravo acquired the syndication rights in 2002 and began re-broadcasting *The West Wing*. In addition, some local affiliates have secured syndication rights as well.¹³

Second, the rapid rise of DVD rental and sales, commensurate with the rejuvenation of the "videophile" as a recurring cultural character, has caused another phenomenon to take hold, namely, production of television program seasons for sale and rental on DVD and VHS.¹⁴ *The Sopranos*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Six Feet Under*, all equally adequate matches for Thompson's quality profile, are just three series to have found extended financial success on the shelves of video stores in the past few years.¹⁵

In the context of scholarship on quality television, *The West Wing* could arguably be understood as a prominent text in a new era of Thompson's quality genre, one that takes advantage of new developments in media industry strategies and technological changes.

¹³ Such as the CBS affiliate in southern Indiana in 2004.

¹⁴ See Barbara Klinger's *Beyond the Multiplex* for the ways the concept of the "cinophile" has been updated and extended through the ubiquity of VHS and DVD (54-90).

¹⁵ As of this writing, the first six seasons of *The West Wing* are available and season seven is sure to follow.

Such strategic decisions are linked to the specific visual economy employed by the text of the show to further highlight for viewers its status as quality. However, Thompson is not the only scholar seeking to reconfigure conceptions of quality television for contemporary audiences.

Deborah L. Jaramillo has observed that quality television can be helpfully understood as a brand, and as such brings together two distinct senses of quality: as a programming category and as a prized demographic. Jaramillo draws on Betsy Williams, whose chapter on *Northern Exposure* in the fifth edition of *Television: The Critical View* points out the linkages between those two senses (Jaramillo 66). Especially in light of the changes in the way television now circulates as a viable commodity form,¹⁶ the notion of *The West Wing* as a product in need of differentiation in a massive market becomes a crucial element in understanding the variety of viewer responses to it. The way producers shape the text itself through a visual economy employed to signal the series' status as packaged for discerning audiences is a central aspect of my argument below.

While all three of these volumes consider the way quality television might be construed as a discursive category with meaning for producers, little exists on the subject in the form of public discourse among viewers.¹⁷ However, for a number of years, one group did operate as a clearinghouse for viewer disquiet about programs they found worth sustaining. Viewers for Quality Television (VQT), a now-defunct advocacy group, began in 1984 with the hope of saving certain programs with low ratings from cancellation, on the

¹⁶ For an in-depth discussion of the commodification of audiences, see "On the Audience Commodity and Its Work" by Dallas Smythe.

¹⁷ Of course, the primary reason for this is the lack of control most viewers have over the means of media production, leaving television viewers few outlets for sharing, much less broadcasting, their opinions to others not intimate with them. This has changed dramatically in the past decade with the rise of the internet and relatively simple and cheap solutions for web design and publication. See Chapter 4 for a more in-depth discussion of the implications of this shift for *West Wing* viewers.

grounds that they were quality programs and therefore of greater value than the norm. The group identifies quality television as that subdivision of programming viewers will find “valuable” beyond the presumably less stringent standard of “entertaining.” From the VQT definition of quality:

A quality drama is involving, confronting and interesting. It rises above entertainment by challenging the viewer to think about it. It dares to take risks. It is honest and illuminating, appeals to the intellect and touches emotions. It requires concentration and attention. It provokes thought.¹⁸

The rhetoric of VQT here indicates the necessity of looking at viewer responses when considering the ways meaning circulates in contemporary media environments. While producers are clearly interested in maximizing identification between the programming they have labeled quality and the affluent viewers they hope will watch it, many viewers are complicit in this construction of quality as a meaningful discursive category. In Chapter 3, I discuss how the notion of “quality television” became contested rhetorical ground among *West Wing* journalists.

Each of these perspectives—quality as style, genre, brand, and audience assessment—engages the medium of television as anything but monolithic. Instead, scholars and viewers alike seek to maintain some conceptual space for the ability to differentiate among programs. But it goes further than this, because it is not just about differentiation. It is about elevation of the program, but also, by extension, of its audiences. All of this discussion over the past two decades hinges implicitly on the concept of “taste”: the maintenance of cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu’s landmark volume, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, provides a helpful context for understanding why “quality” has become rhetorically contested ground. For Bourdieu, “Consumption is...a stage in a process of communication, that is, an

¹⁸ From www.vqt.org, accessed 12 Apr 2000.

act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code” (2). The practices of consumption necessitate mastery of cultural codes in ways no simple model of communication can provide. To understand how meanings actually circulate, then, we must attend to the responses of viewers as much as we attend to the intentions of producers and the structures of the text itself. Our most rigorous scholarship should attend to all three.

Bourdieu’s conception of taste has much in common with the notion of judgment in contemporary rhetorical theory. Rather than a top-down theory of cultural production, we must recognize the ways a variety of individual agents become involved in the situated, practical decisions that ultimately constitute a culture’s template for the production of meaning. As one group of cultural producers, television viewers participate in this activity, one whose central practices are constitutive of the social world:

...all knowledge, and in particular all knowledge of the social world, is an act of construction implementing schemes of thought and expression...between conditions of existence and practices or representations there intervenes the structuring activity of the agents, who, far from reacting mechanically to mechanical stimulations, respond to the invitations or threats of a world whose meaning they have helped to produce... (467).

The actual practices of television viewing, together with communicative events about viewing, become the raw materials through which meaning is generated and sustained. Among *West Wing* viewers, the maintenance of the category of quality television becomes shorthand for viewers interested in participating in certain consumption practices and limiting others.

Far from identifying a hierarchy of taste, in which “quality television” is at the top and “reality television” is at the bottom, Bourdieu recognizes taste as something that circulates differently among different groups and in different contexts. There exists a

constant struggle over the notion of “quality television” among producers, journalists, and fans. As my analysis of production practices in Chapter 2 and consideration of the circulation of “quality” and “realism” among journalists in Chapter 3 show, the needs of the program’s producers and popular critics have significantly constrained the parameters of what *The West Wing* has meant in contemporary culture. However, such narrowing of possible meanings for the program’s representations is not fixed by producers and others in power. Instead, there is a constant struggle over its meaning. Indeed, online newsgroups proliferate with interpretations of particular roles that *The West Wing* serves for individual viewers, especially among fan citizens, who use the show both as exemplar *and* resource.

There is a recognition (if usually implicit) among viewers that “quality” is a contested term and its meaning and usage shifts as it becomes articulated with various cultural structures. The three groups of viewers I discuss in this project operate in a constant state of flux and struggle over the program’s various meanings. While some may accept this state of affairs as indicative of postmodern life and sometimes even relish it, many viewers treat it as a point of considerable anxiety. The very malleability of our language, how it is shaped by use and context, activates considerable angst for many viewers and is the source of much that has been written about the show

When considering the public discourse surrounding the series, we see constant reference to one important aspect of its visual economy, and that is its “realism.” Media scholars have considered this concept in a number of works over the years, and one element they share is a sense that the term is slippery and complicated. Raymond Williams recognized its difficulty (257) and John Corner has identified its paradoxical role as both indispensable and more cloudy than clarifying (27). Fiske draws our attention to its role as

an ideological tool that helps us make sense of the world around us. In his discussion of television and realism, he writes:

...it is the form that [the definition of the world and the agenda that constitutes it] are given that produces the point of view from which we look at them, and thus the sense we make of them and, paradoxically, the sense they make of us. For making sense is always a two-way process: understanding the object necessarily involves defining the subject who is doing the understanding (23).

This two-way process underlies and informs the ways particular kinds of realism become linked to particular ideologies enacted by producers and viewers of particular programs. The process of identification itself entails some recognition amongst all viewers that a program's specific representation of reality is compelling.

We shall see that *West Wing* viewers identify a range of kinds of representations within the text of the program itself as "realistic." Some viewers are drawn to its costly sets, frequent location shooting in Washington, D.C., and generally similar physicality when compared to the actual White House. Others respond to the ways the characters seem to enact the kind of idealized relationships we hope our nation's leaders maintain with one another. Ien Ang introduced a notion of "emotional realism" to describe how *Dallas* viewers understood that series to be realistic. This concept refers to the ways audiences identify fictional characters' responses to situations and other characters as lifelike, rather than any specific object, setting, lighting style or mode of dress. She sets this in opposition to a "literal, referential value" (1996 89), in which the emphasis is on the fictional world as a mirror of the actual one rather than on emotional fidelity.¹⁹ Regarding *The West Wing*, an appropriate term might be "stylized realism": there are a variety of elements that strike viewers as realistic, both in the literal and emotional senses, but there are also several

¹⁹ John Storey also discusses the various senses of realism in *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (154).

prominent aspects of its visual economy, including its heavy use of Steadicam and dark lighting scheme, that immediately mark its specific version of televisuality. What emerges when we study a range of responses to the series is a sense that realism has a prominent role in the struggle over the shared meaning of the series.

The stakes in that struggle can be high. A number of ideological formations arise. In what we might call the realist camp, the issue is whether producers ought to be allowed to portray anything in a manner other than it is (or, more correctly, seems to be) and especially situations and contexts that have real-life counterparts.²⁰ This group seems worried that audiences can be too easily fooled into assuming what they see represented on television is more accurate than it seems to be, and would make real (in this case political) decisions accordingly, with what amounts to false information. Fiske identifies what is at stake for those who maintain this position when he writes:

Realism involves a fidelity both to the physical, sensually perceived details of the external world, and to the values of the dominant ideology....Ideology is mapped onto the objective world of 'reality,' and the accuracy of realism's representations of the details of this 'real' world becomes the validation of the ideology it has been made to bear (36).

For those whose anxieties are heightened by the lack of a distinct boundary between fiction and reality, their ideological control will be undermined if too many fantastic images are allowed to pass as realistic.

For what we might call the constructionist camp, the question is whether any relationship between fiction and reality is ultimately appropriate. This position stems from an unwillingness to stipulate that the categories of fiction and reality are separable or even marginally maintainable. Instead, adherents of this group would argue that, in the absence of

²⁰ Williams explains this objection in more depth in *Keywords* (261), but it can be traced back as far as Plato and his worries about artists' abilities to "fool" onlookers into thinking a representation was actually the thing it represented (see, for example, *The Republic*, Book III, 393a-398d).

any discernable boundary between the two categories in practice, there is no need to debate the merits of any text's ties to or breaks from reality. The very discussion would be pointless. As we will see, viewers of *The West Wing* take up positions all along a spectrum that spans realism and constructionism, with a variety of ideological effects.

In addition, realism is a value that has produced substantive cachet among political operatives of various stripes: politicians, policy advisors, diplomats, and academics in political science, i.e., the very group of viewers *West Wing*'s producers appear most desperate to court through their intense attention to detail. Common wisdom among this group is that one cannot be an idealist and hope to get policy done in the contemporary political world. So, the specifically political version of realism becomes the primary means of producing an actual agenda, whether one's politics are radical, progressive, or conservative.²¹ Given this, there can be significant aversion to the mixing of politics and entertainment, where the assumption is that the former is focused on realism and the latter on fantasy. Even in the case of activist approaches to political change, fantasy that masquerades as reality can, according to this flavor of political realism, lead to apathy and stunt political action. For many political activists, then, the realms of "fiction" and "reality" should not be allowed to reflect one another too readily, lest viewers believe their own real participation is superfluous.

These considerations are relevant to any discussion of television audiences, but they take on a particularly important cast in light of interactions between groups of viewers (instead of between viewers and representations) such as those participating in online forums. With respect to *The West Wing*, we shall see a significant aspect of the struggle among online

²¹ See Gilbert, 33-34.

group participants over the meanings of the show is a contest over valuations of shared denotations (though different denotations do exist and circulate).²² The ability to make situated judgments about the role of a particular representation's meaning in their daily lives is fundamental to the ways many *West Wing* viewers seem to negotiate its influence and power. The rise of cynicism, bemoaned by some contemporary scholars, can be understood at some level as a recognition of the lack of shared denotations and a willingness to disentangle oneself from the complexities of working them out through conflict and debate. This cynicism has become one prominent tactic, especially among professional journalists, for contending with the gaps between interpretations of the show, and has given rise to much thinking about its role in contemporary American culture.

What Is Bad About a Fragmented and Cynical Society?

One reason quality television has become so oft-repeated among producers, journalists, and fans is arguably because of the broader discourse in contemporary American society about cynicism: of journalists regarding their ability to “objectively” report the news, of intellectuals regarding their ability to keep from becoming jaded about their disciplines, and of citizens’ inability to sustain engagement with the political process for which they supposedly constitute the political foundation. These discussions are rather pervasive.²³ However, in reference to *The West Wing*, they have taken on a particularly fervent cast. As I describe in Chapter 3, many professional journalists either regard the show as overly sentimental, or express their anxieties about the prevalence of cynicism through their

²² Celeste Condit explores the nuances of this distinction in “The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy,” especially on 504.

²³ From straightforward pieces like Michael Schudson’s “Is Journalism Hopelessly Cynical?” to work by scholars and intellectuals that raise the specter of cynicism without necessarily vocalizing it (like that of Robert Putnam and Neil Postman), to the cocked eyebrows of “fake journalists” on *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*, cynicism is both practiced and discussed in the public square at length.

musings about the program's quality and realism. The way these issues have developed in reference to *The West Wing* are most often connected to its ostensibly political content. (Such content is "ostensible" because the series could be and has been considered a "workplace drama" in which the political backdrop is less a central element of its development than a context within which the characters can interact with greater dramatic impact.) I argue the politics "of the series" (or perhaps "discussed within" it) have been interpreted by viewers as central, and therefore become central. Analogues for the arguments of social and political theorists who worry an increase in cynicism is bad for participatory and deliberative democracy can be found quite regularly in newspaper and magazine articles about the series.

For example, Robert Putnam's now-familiar *Bowling Alone* argues that social capital—the notion that "social networks have value" (Putnam 19)—has been in decline, and that this is a significant problem for any society, but especially democratic ones:

What is at stake is not merely warm, cuddly feelings or frissons of community pride....our schools and neighborhoods don't work so well when community bonds slacken...our economy, our democracy, and even our health and happiness depend on adequate stocks of social capital (28).

For Putnam, these trends are not irreversible, but they are a problem. While the connections he indicates between social and political capital have been critiqued,²⁴ he makes a strong, *prima facie* case for the need to try to reverse these trends: social links between people can work as buffers for conflict and negativity (often coded as "cynicism") in all kinds of situations (you would be far less likely to scream at someone you know if she cut you off on the highway than a stranger). This calculus of social goods requires groups of self-interested individuals to find ways to create interwoven communities (as opposed to loosely-joined

²⁴ See Van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, 62.

groups) in order to beat back an encroaching fragmentation that spells doom for democratic practice.

Cass Sunstein offers a similar argument that extends this question to the internet. His thesis is that “a well-functioning system of free expression must meet two distinctive requirements: first, people should be exposed to materials they would not have chosen in advance....second, many or most citizens should have a range of common experiences” (*Republic.com* 8). He puts a particularly fine point on it when he writes:

a well-functioning democracy—a republic—depends not just on freedom from censorship, but also on a set of common experiences and on unsought, unanticipated, and even unwanted exposures to diverse topics, people, and ideas. A system of “gated communities” is as unhealthy for cyberspace as it is for the real world (*Echo Chambers* 5).

His argument rests on a critique of contemporary social and political fragmentation. Rather than to valorize fragmentation for how it democratizes communities and societies, he indicates how it hinders them by severing the connections between individuals who constitute them. For print journalists, this arguably manifests itself in a cynical retreat from assessment of political issues, in which complaint replaces engagement. Sunstein underscores the conclusion that “general interest intermediaries”—newspapers, magazines, and television news and documentary programs designed to address a general audience—are a crucial aspect of deliberative democracy because information is a “public good”: the public proportionally benefits the more widely information is circulated (*Republic.com* 34, 99).

While Sunstein does not specifically address cynicism or the potential problems it might pose to governance rooted in engagement, both he and Putnam nod in that direction: social fragmentation is problematic whether it occurs through unintentional focus on “image tribes” and “the Daily Me,” or through a motivated retreat from social engagement

encouraged by cynical attention to public life. Other voices in this conversation have spoken more vehemently about the power of cynicism itself to eat away at the social fabric.

Consider, for example, William Chaloupka, who wrote in 1999 that “the reluctance of citizens to participate is so resolute and so odd, given their obvious dissatisfaction, that it deserves closer attention” (19). Chaloupka identifies a central irony in the activity cynicism describes: rather than to motivate activity and engagement, dissatisfaction refracted through cynicism encourages *dis*-engagement, as if the depth of the system’s brokenness is so great the cynic has become overwhelmed and retreats from public interaction.

Chaloupka also suggests television itself, a ubiquitous fixture that promotes an effected intimacy through close-ups and direct address, has become a primary medium through which cynicism is magnified, extended, and sustained:

We fear, distrust, and love TV. It energizes us, but the energy jangles. More than it is false, censored, biased, or annoying, TV is cynical....People are suspicious of television; to be a TV viewer is also to be a TV critic. But our criticisms paint us into a corner....Asking television to be more accurate or less biased misses the point. Because it produces so many images, TV allows for myriad interpretations and thus turns the puzzle to its advantage. All are irrelevant to its real objective—to portray itself as reliable and to keep you watching (104).

This view of television is itself somewhat cynical, furthering as it does earlier fear-mongering anti-television industry voices.²⁵ These voices speak about the television industry as they would a dangerous animal: a beast in which no reason can be found and therefore toward which we must be ever vigilant.

This perspective is as old as the medium itself. At least since Newton Minow dubbed it the “Vast Wasteland,” Americans have harbored a notion of television as potentially damaging to society. The preceding discussion of quality television is one way the television

²⁵ See Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* for examples of the kind of approach to media to which I refer.

industry has attempted to address these concerns, but they remain pervasive. Others who have written about the “cynical society” have made similar claims about television.²⁶

Embedded in Chaloupka’s assertion is another important piece of the problem. “To be a TV viewer is also to be a critic.” Put this way, there is little conceptual distance between “critic” and “cynic.” As if to highlight this sense of the nature of cynicism, Chaloupka notes: “Journalists are our archetypal cynics, having been given the professional responsibility of going to work every day knowing they will doubt the word of nearly everyone they contact” (Chaloupka 101). As we will see in Chapter 3, a cynical perspective is as pervasive among *West Wing* journalists as such comments seem to imply.

For all of these writers—Putnam, Sunstein, and Chaloupka—the trends they observe are reversible if readers are willing to enact new social practices (or breathe new life into waning ones). If the fragmentation and cynicism they identify among contemporary Americans is a broad problem, they each suggest a different set of strategies for solving it. In some senses, the current project may be seen as a response to the general problems they identify, but what kind of response? An important goal of this project is to consider the specific, detailed, and situated responses of producers and consumers of a particularly prominent television series, as opposed to the use of more quantitative and statistical data, to think through some of the problems raised by contemporary articulation of television and politics in the U.S. In circumventing attention to actual responses made by actual viewers, contemporary social critics like Putnam and Sunstein run the risk of skewing their conclusions through production of logical frameworks that are helpful in making society

²⁶ For example, Jeffrey Goldfarb’s *The Cynical Society* claims that “television, our major form of society-wide communication, is saturated with lies and manipulations” (13). Michael Lerner’s *The Politics of Meaning* promotes a similar outlook in claiming that the media’s approach to politics represents “an antipathy based on their own deep, almost religious commitment to the individualism and cynicism that form the ‘common sense’ of contemporary American life” (315).

more “legible,” but can overlook important nuances in actual social interactions.²⁷ There are two ways my project might inform this problem. Let us call them the weak and strong responses.

The weak response takes their framings of the problem as more-or-less accurate. If society is becoming more fragmented and cynical, then *West Wing* viewers show signs both of repeating and extending those trends (especially among producers, whose commercial interests may inordinately shape and constrain the possibilities in the show, and among journalists, whose cynical approach to the show undercuts its power), and countering them, especially among online fans. Framing such a weak response, we would see the kinds of practices employed by *West Wing* journalists and print critics as tending toward the cynical, which arguably discourages the production of social capital (“Why should we even bother? They will just screw it up again, somehow.”) In contrast, we would imagine alt.tv.the-west-wing and other fan forums of *The West Wing* as potential solutions to the trends of fragmentation and cynicism. In this view, the ways these forums work specifically in the case of *West Wing* fans seems to encourage the kind of social capital production and maintenance these authors recommend. I present evidence to suggest that at the least, this weak response is viable and adds new insight into the activity of *West Wing* viewer responses.

However, there is a potentially stronger response to these claims that emerges from the present project. According to this second perspective, the assumptions that fragmentation and cynicism are serious problems for deliberative democracy are themselves problems in need of reworking. I provide some evidence to suggest that simply because a small group of

²⁷ See James C. Scott’s *Seeing Like a State* for more the concept of legibility (2-3).

individuals chooses to form an online community dedicated to some specific niche—in other words, to fragment themselves from the broader society—does not necessarily spell disaster for social bonds. In addition, though cynicism when all-encompassing as a critical disengagement from political action remains a serious problem, I also show cynicism is less of a pervasive form of communication and more one political style or voice from among many with which an individual may choose to speak.²⁸ The characteristics of an agent who is both a fan *and* a citizen can merge into something more powerful than either alone, and in the process perhaps help to negotiate daily life in a more productive manner.

One disciplinary conversation that articulates well with this strong response is that among contemporary rhetorical theorists on prudence (also known as *phronesis* and practical wisdom). This concept describes the way actors in the situated world of real life bring judgment to bear on contingent and multifaceted social problems.²⁹ Beginning with the Greeks and especially Aristotle, practical wisdom has an ancient intellectual history, and though it has at times fallen out of favor as a driving concept for social life, it has resurfaced throughout history, especially in cultures and ages when social practices were varied and multivocal.³⁰ What is most salient about the nature of prudence with regard to the present project is its role as “a way of thinking, speaking, acting, and judging in the midst of complexity and change” (Hariman, 2003 294). The realm of the contingent, in which answers cannot be secured once and for all but rather temporarily, in the specific context in which they arise, requires a kind of decision-making rooted in judgment that citizens must cultivate through practice. Judgments are the central form of decision-making in all

²⁸ See Hariman’s *Political Style: The Artistry of Power*, especially 1-12, for a discussion of the concept of political style.

²⁹ See Hariman, 2003, vii-x.

³⁰ Ibid., 287-288. For discussions of Aristotle’s attention to the concept, see also Thomas Farrell’s *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*, 97-99, and Ronald Beiner’s *Political Judgment*, 72-82.

contingent matters, including those of aesthetics, when judging forms of art, and politics, when judging what the public should do (Beiner 6).

A simple but helpful definition of judgment is that it is the process of making decisions based on experience and contingent evidence. In the realm of the social, judgment is the primary means through which individuals make decisions. Within a community, decisions are made more through comparisons of different actions through identification, debate, and conflict than they are through reasoned assessment of logically applied rules and evidence. Take, for example, Ronald Beiner's description:

Judgment is a form of mental activity that is *not bound by rules*, is not subject to explicit specification of its mode of operation (unlike methodical rationality), and *comes into play beyond the confines of rule-governed intelligence*. At the same time, judgment is not without rule or reason, but rather, must strive for general validity (Beiner 2, emphasis added).

The delicate balance Beiner describes here—not bound by rules and yet striving for a general validity—is one no closed, logical system can maintain on its own.³¹ Rather, judgment works through a constant and repetitive struggle among various actors in a community to always re-constitute what good judgment is, through good and bad examples produced in actual contexts by individuals with situated identities. While this could describe many groups, it surely describes the participants of alt.tv.the-west-wing, and arguably describes journalists who write about *The West Wing* and even its own producers. Each of these three groups makes constant, contingent, and contextually situated judgments about the series as a fundamental aspect of their interactions with one another.³² While each group is constrained socially, politically, and institutionally in somewhat different ways, as communities my

³¹ See also Scott's consideration of *metis* (which, as Hariman points out in *Prudence*, Scott uses quite similarly to prudence, 293), especially 309-316.

³² One might even apply Hariman's comment that they "attempt to both make a profit and not pollute" (2003 293) to producers and journalists as an apt summation of their use of judgment in their professional roles.

research suggests they are each “committed (consciously or unwittingly) to keeping a political practice a *sustainable* practice” (Hariman, 2003 295, emphasis added). Their roles as citizens are intimately connected to their status as fans, and as such both their aesthetic and their political judgments become central aspects of their communities’ constitution and maintenance. When community participants focus on sustainability, they become more tolerant of the plurality of voices therein and dissent among them.

Analysis of the specific practices at work among the texts produced by online forum participants requires attention to the specifics of online communication as a medium, as well as a consideration of the work on practical wisdom in rhetorical theory. The latter is necessary because the practices of viewers with relatively little power, such as fans, are tactical in Michel De Certeau’s sense, even more so than producers and journalists.³³ As such, viewers’ negotiations of the series are especially heterogeneous and yet presented as an overt means to constitute a community. This kind of community, a community of judgment, is one in which judgment plays a central role in communication and interaction, as opposed to a regular but not pervasive one.

How Is Judgment Enacted in Online Fan Communities?

Among communication scholars, the notion that viewers are active has been more or less taken for granted. Work over the past 40 years in media and cultural studies, communication theory, and rhetorical studies has produced an image of the individual viewer as anything but passive in her reception of media and other texts.³⁴ These arguments have

³³ That is, tactical rather than strategic, because such practices are employed in a cultural space in which they lack the power to fully manipulate the texts they employ. (De Certeau xix).

³⁴ In media and cultural studies, scholars from the British Cultural Studies camp have been integral to theorizing and disseminating this viewpoint. Others include scholars like John Fiske and Lawrence Grossberg. In communication theory Stanley Fish’s seminal book, *Is There a Text in This Class?* stands out, and rhetorical studies has seen a real debate about the nature of the audience’s participation in construction of the speech. See also Lloyd Bitzer’s “The Rhetorical Situation” and subsequent responses by Richard Vatz (“the Myth of the

adeptly countered earlier assumptions about the passivity of film and television spectators made by some film scholars as well as proponents of the “culture industries” school of cultural studies.³⁵ While some voices of this later camp continue today, they come mostly from alarmists who refuse to acknowledge the practices of actual viewers.³⁶ Instead, contemporary media research has replaced claims to passivity with images of viewers as readers, consumers, and poachers of the text, truly responding to it (and often physically doing things with it or to it).³⁷

However, the specific form of that activity remains open to further consideration. For some viewers, agency is mobilized in the service of resisting dominant readings, through strategies that resist or oppose such dominant readings in various ways. Work by many media scholars suggests such activity can involve varying degrees of agency.³⁸ What I mean here is that some viewers stop at the moment that immediately follows their resistant read: I refuse the idea that this toothpaste will really make my life better. End of story. I oppose the notion that forensic science will inevitably unearth the real killer. Period.

Rhetorical Situation” and Barbara Biesecker (“Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from Within the Thematic of *Differance*”) in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, in which the concept of the audience and its role in the production of meaning is hotly contested. Regardless, “passive” is not a common term in that dialogue.

³⁵ The most prominent scholars here are Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, whose argument in *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* draws upon a Marxist conception of mass media production as a powerful ideological tool. However, even early film theorists and historians like Andre Bazin in “What is Cinema?” (9-16) and Siegfried Kracauer in *From Caligari to Hitler: a Psychological History of German Film* (5-6) write about the power of film to move audiences in a way that never addresses audiences’ ability or interest in producing novel or contrary readings of visual texts.

³⁶ See Postman.

³⁷ In the case of the former, the classic source is Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance*, but many others have followed; those who speak of audiences as “consumers” include especially the British Cultural Studies School (for example, du Gay, et al. in the *Doing Cultural Studies* series, Douglas Kellner in *Media Culture* and David Morley’s work on *Nationwide*); “poachers” is the preferred metaphor of de Certeau and, by extension, Henry Jenkins.

³⁸ For example, see Ang’s “Wanted: Audiences. On the Politics of Empirical Audience Studies,” 316-319); John Fiske’s *Television Culture* (65-77); Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” (508-511) to name only some of the more well-known works in this area of research.

By contrast, work on fan culture indicates agency can be and has been mobilized in a more productive way, in the sense that the appropriations of circulated media texts are reworked and made to mean differently, not only for isolated individuals, but for a *broader community*, through various channels of circulation. In fact, ethnographic and field research indicates that viewers are up to quite a bit while viewing.³⁹ Perhaps this comes as no surprise, but it is helpful to articulate, especially in the current climate of acceptance of media effects research.⁴⁰ In addition, the specific form of viewer activity, as well as its impetus and potential effects within social discourse, remain unclear and to a large extent up for grabs. The reason for this is not surprising: the one thing viewers are, even more than active, is atomized about the reasons why and uses to which they put what they watch.

Hence, the call made by Jensen and Pauly for more research grounded in studying actual viewers: trying to find out what specifically they *do* with the media texts they consume (168). Jennifer Hayward makes a similar proposal in *Consuming Pleasures*:

Rather than select our favorite mass texts and argue that they are exemplary, setting them above other such texts as unique paragons of “good taste” to prove them worthy in spite of their mode of production, we could focus on other qualities....One way to escape the need...to evaluate and then canonize particular texts is to focus on function rather than ‘quality’: what do such texts *do* for their readers, what purpose do they serve in readers’ lives, what kinds of thought processes, discussions, activities, and meanings do they enable (11)?

Hayward reacts here to the very suggestion that a canon can or ought to be agreed upon, moving in favor of attention to audiences’ practices—not just of viewing itself, but to the

³⁹ For example, see Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* and Ann Gray’s “Behind Closed Doors: Video Recorders in the Home.”

⁴⁰ David Gauntlett has been an outspoken opponent of media effects research and its claims to legitimacy, especially in the minds of federal policy-makers. His “Ten Problems with Media Effects” has circulated widely on the internet. He makes the argument more deliberately in “The Worrying Influence of “Media Effects” Studies.” In addition, Henry Jenkins has also made compelling arguments against media effects’ influence in the public sphere. A narrative of his service as a witness in a media violence hearing on Capitol Hill has also circulated widely, and he has called for a change in the way policy-makers understand media use in “Lessons from Littleton: What Congress Doesn’t Want to Hear About Youth and Media.”

myriad appropriations of a text, as meaning, moment, and material fact: as meaning, a text accumulates significance through its ability to symbolize other things; as moment, a text becomes linked to an historical context; as material fact, a text participates in certain realities of economic and social production and is constrained by them. Such an opening up of the roles and uses of media texts suggests the need for a more dynamic and multivocal space within which viewers can engage in open discussion and often debate regarding the relative merits of such uses. As I have just described, the virtual spaces Sunstein worries about work well to fill this newly complex media environment. However, to study such spaces in ways that allow scholars access to their rich complexity requires different strategies than the most traditional modes of media scholarship.⁴¹

The strategy recommended by many and practiced by some is the use of ethnographic methods of research in the study of media audiences. Much of this research takes the form of field work, interviews, and the like, and capitalizes on the ability of the researcher to follow up on certain threads of an interview or discussion among participants that seems particularly salient or relevant to the topic under consideration. Unlike an undirected discussion among fans, the conversation can, at times, be steered toward or away from issues that are—in the mind of the researcher—more or less connected to the phenomenon she is attempting to study.

This can also be a key criticism of ethnographic study, i.e., that the ethnographer necessarily must inject something of herself into the object of her research, for she must at the very least ask certain questions and not others, and quite often becomes wrapped up in the interactions with her “subjects” (to use a term more common in quantitative research).

⁴¹ Here I am thinking primarily of textual analysis by film and comparative literature scholars and content analysis by scholars in the social sciences.

This is perhaps only natural, but it does limit and restrict results from attaining the kind of logical, ordered rigor many today deem necessary criteria for “good research.” Ethnography is by nature messy, organic, and human. As such, there will always be those who disregard its conclusions. However, recent research on online fan forums and the virtual communities enacted therein indicates that ethnographic methods are important for understanding the practices of online fans. This is especially central to understanding how alt.tv.the-west-wing manages anxieties about quality, realism, and politics on *The West Wing*, for it allows the researcher to assess the processes of identification employed by fans as they arise in the situated context of the forum itself.

There is perhaps no single author more responsible for the current explosion of scholarly work on fan culture than Henry Jenkins. His study of science fiction fans, *Textual Poachers*, draws on the work of Radway, Ang and other early ethnographers, and crafts an accessible and yet fiercely defended position on the validity and power of fan practices. Jenkins writes in his conclusion, “I am not claiming that there is anything particularly empowering about the texts fans embrace. I am, however, claiming that there is something empowering about what fans do with those texts in the process of assimilating them to the particulars of their lives” (Jenkins 284). With this argument, dually rooted as it is in the high theory of De Certeau and the variety of representative exemplars of fan activity Jenkins chronicles, the book has catalyzed a number of studies of other fan communities.

Matt Hills is one of the first to challenge Jenkins’ theoretical position without denying the need to continue to study the practices and responses of fans. Hills argues that fandom has served as a convenient stone against which to grind a variety of conceptual axes promoted by a certain subsection of the scholarly community. In explicitly noting, “one

important question which has not yet been adequately addressed is *what fandom does culturally* rather than how fandom can be fitted into academic norms of ‘resistant’ or ‘complicit’ readings” (Hills xii) he explicitly rejects Jenkins’ perspective on fans.⁴² This is an important failing any research on fans must be careful to address, either through a refutation of his argument or through a heightened sensitivity to the pitfalls he warns against. To remain vigilant in the face of this kind of imposition of the researcher’s perspective, and to study deeply the ways communities interact and manage their relationship to an ongoing media text, the present study incorporates and intermingles work in media and rhetorical studies. This helps to identify and attend to the ways media scholars’ focus on the specific cultural practices of production and consumption are connected to theorizing of the nature of contingency and identification so fundamental to contemporary rhetorical theory.

Take Nancy Baym’s *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*. In it, Baym uses ethnographic techniques to help build an interpretation of the links between audience and community in online soap forums. She distinguishes between “audience” and “community” by indicating their respective connection to “textual” and “social” dimensions, arguing that online fans may at first relate through shared attention to their object of fandom, but those textual dimensions slowly give way to social ones as the audience for a television program becomes a community (Baym 19). More than this, fans social relationships as “audience” and as “community” intermingle in online fan forums, setting up a new relationships in which one’s identity as a fan becomes fundamentally tied to one’s identity as a member of a particular community. Baym makes a vigorous case for the necessity of using ethnographic methodologies in studying online newsgroups:

⁴² He notes that Jenkins himself admits to the tactical nature of his book (10).

When we look closely and holistically at the actual behaviors of online communities, it becomes clear that these groups develop complex and distinctive identities, identities that result unpredictably from combinations of preexisting factors, participants' appropriations of those factors, and the emergent forces that those appropriations generate. We cannot understand these complex dynamics by just thinking about them. Online social worlds are accessible to researchers in ways that few other worlds are. If we want to understand them, we need to look with rigor and detail (198).

In highlighting the contextual nature of online communities, Baym opens one side of a bridge between media and rhetorical studies, namely, the role of "practice" in our understanding of how such communities function over time. Hariman's discussion of the role of twenty-first century prudence as a practice argues such a conception allows us to shift our notion of prudence from a set of cognitive rules to "habits, routines, and rituals" (2003 294). I show that alt.tv.the-west-wing participants use the ability to respond to others provided by digitally networked technologies to produce something more than a simple catalog of tastes about *The West Wing*. Instead, like Baym's rec.arts.soaps participants, they create and sustain a community organized around a habitual return to consideration of those tastes. However, where the textual or aesthetic intermingles with the social in Baym's conception of online fandom, in alt.tv.the-west-wing, participants circulate and conflict over individual aesthetic and political arguments about *The West Wing*. The introduction of the specifically political milieu into online *West Wing* fandom prompts a unique kind of community and a unique kind of public character. I discuss these concepts in more detail in Chapter 4 and 5 below.

Baym is not the only scholar writing about the specific practices of fan communities. Lisbet Van Zoonen's *Entertaining the Citizen* has in some ways already begun analyzing some of the connections I elaborate upon below. Her central thesis is that entertainment programming need not be seen as disconnected from politics solely because it has been primarily constructed to entertain instead of inform or persuade. Narrative fiction can and

does provide resources for political deliberation among its viewers, when their responses to the programs and films they consume are considered. For example, she makes the following provocative claim: “the representation of politics on television, generically entertaining, may be seen as inviting the affective intelligence that is vital to keep political involvement and activity going” (Van Zoonen 49).⁴³ Thus, her work offers both a theoretical and methodological foundation for the direction of the present study.

However, while Van Zoonen is concerned with developing an apologetics for the relationship between entertainment and politics, the present study seeks to explain how this process has developed in reference to a particular television program, *The West Wing*, and whether the specifics of those public interactions can tell us anything about the relationship Van Zoonen wishes to address. Participants of the *West Wing* newsgroup as a group attempt to deal with questions posed to them as problems to be solved rather than part of a body of knowledge to be widened. Respondents variably mix both statements of dogmatic fact with argument and persuasive rhetoric intended to suggest a compelling identification with the position expressed by the speaker. In so doing, viewers interpret their own experience of both the show and U.S. public culture in order to align those interpretations with a conception of the social and political order with which they can identify.

Project Overview

In the preceding section, I crafted an interdisciplinary conversation between rhetorical, media, and cultural studies scholars on the nature of television, community, judgment, and audiences. This project seeks to enter into that interwoven conversation in order to provide further insight and understanding about the ways *West Wing* viewers incorporate their public roles as both fans and citizens into a community centered around the

⁴³ I will discuss Van Zoonen’s work in more depth in Chapter 4.

relationship between aesthetic and political judgments. Before I begin the analysis, however, I need to be clear about what this project is, and what it is not. Each of the central chapters of this project attends to the responses to *The West Wing* of a specific group of its viewers: the producers of the series, including actors and network executives, in Chapter 2; journalists and popular critics who have printed articles about the series in Chapter 3; participants in online forums about the series in Chapter 4. At stake among and between the differences between them is a recognition of the role *The West Wing* has played for American television viewers in terms of a more general understanding of commercial television, realism, and politics. Certainly, the show has not been the only cultural site for understanding and interpreting these concepts in recent years, but it is arguably one of the most visible and pervasive, and arguably one of the most significant. Given this, a close, extended look at how specific groups have articulated the show's meaning and relevance *in practice* in their daily lives will help to explore the potential for the relationship between entertainment and public political discourse.

There are several methodological limitations to the study that warrant mention. First, the object of study is small by some standards: I analyze approximately 200 professional articles from US, Canadian, and British newspapers and magazines together with the almost 50,000 threads available at alt.tv.the-west-wing and a prolonged *West Wing*-themed thread from soc.history.what-if. I highlight a much smaller subset of this body of research in the analysis that follows, looking closely at them as a means toward spotlighting common themes. Included among the newspaper and magazine articles are a number of interviews with production staff and actors from the series, which figure prominently in Chapter 2. Some of the professional responses I have studied were first brought to my attention by

participants in the newsgroup: an individual saw an article online or in their hometown paper that referenced *The West Wing* in some way and forwarded either the link or the full text to the group for consideration. Often heated debates over the impact and meaning of the article in question ensued, further complicating the web of discursive strands between *The West Wing*, its producers, journalists, and fans. I consider such responses in Chapter 4.

Second, this project has developed over a number of years, and while when first proposed it appeared to be the only work on *The West Wing*, during those years a number of other scholars in a variety of disciplines have taken on the series and its role in contemporary American culture. While a variety of interesting work on the show has been done, unfortunately little of it is helpful in the present analysis.⁴⁴ Much of this work takes *The West Wing* as the most prominent in a growing genre of fiction sometimes labeled “political drama.” From films like *Dave*, *Primary Colors*, and *The American President* to television series like *Spin City*, *Mr. Sterling*, *Jack and Bobby*, and *Commander in Chief*, stories about the lives of politicians and their staffs have slowly begun to trickle into American popular culture.⁴⁵ Previously considered a thankless but necessary glue that holds the workings of state machinery together, public service has become a source of political and social drama to be mined for its narrative depth and complexity. *The West Wing* arrives at a time when it is

⁴⁴ Work to date on the series itself—produced only in the past couple of years, after the series had already been on the air for three seasons—tends to evolve out of the work of humanities scholars interested in political science and political communication. In the former category are authors such as Nathan Paxton (forthcoming), and in the latter scholars like Trevor Parry-Giles and Donnalyn Pompper. A volume of essays, edited by John E. O’Connor and Peter C. Rollins, was published in 2003 that included a variety of approaches to the series. One section in that volume is entitled “Perceptions of *The West Wing*,” but instead of being focused on audience responses, it is comprised of three articles that offer individual perspectives on the role of the series. See Works Cited for full citations.

⁴⁵ It is arguably since the national disillusionment with the Presidency, marked by the resignation of Richard Nixon, that producers and audiences have begun to consider the possibilities of fictional portrayals of elected officials and politicians as leading men and women with lives complex enough to be ones we might be interested in experiencing.

acceptable to tell President Nixon's tale as *Nixon*, a film which delves into his psychological background, personal family life, and political successes and failures.⁴⁶

Work in the social sciences has also considered the role of *The West Wing*: R. Lance Holbert, et al., have considered the way the series is an instance of the popular media effects concept of "priming." Here, his research concludes that the show encourages positive impressions of all U.S. presidents in its audiences, as indicated by surveys of viewers and non-viewers. Others have considered the show in the context of "agenda setting," another popular approach among scholars who study media effects, seeking to ascertain whether topics presented on the show precede an up-turn in awareness of the topic in the broader populace. The implication here would be that the show may not tell us what to think, but it might set the agenda for what we are most aware of and talk about most often.

However, none of this work considers in any sustained way the specific roles the series has played for particular viewers, especially fans. Instead, much of the work relies heavily on more traditional methods of media scholarship, especially textual analysis. While textual analysis is crucial to a thorough understanding of media texts, lack of attention to what audiences *do* with the texts they consume and to what ends is incomplete at best. One important goal of this project is to supplement existing scholarship on this important television series through the addition of research on audience reception.

Finally, a few words must be said about my choice of terminology. First, the reader will notice I maintain a distinction between "producer," "journalist," and "fan." These three groups are not as easily separated as the writing might sometimes make it appear. Surely, though they may admit it in print or they may not, the show's producers and journalists

⁴⁶ However, interestingly, not ultimately acceptable to do the same with President Reagan, whose prime time bio-pic was pulled by CBS after significant controversy. Most likely, this was due to his relatively recent death and the hero-worship that accompanied it.

writing for newspapers or magazines can be fans of the show in the particular way scholarship on fans has wanted to define them.⁴⁷ However, there are reasons why these groups are more productively left in tension with one another. First, “producers” makes sense as a separate category of viewers because only they actually produce the representations that appear as *The West Wing*.⁴⁸ Second, “journalists” may be distinguished from fans in that their work has been pre-selected by the institution in which they operate as acceptable discourse, as opposed to the traditional “fan,” whose work is often sublimated or marginalized. The individual who writes an article for a newspaper on *The West Wing* and is accepted by society as professional would receive empty platitudes at best and possibly sneers of rebuke were she to post the same article in an online chat room or fanzine, at least from many of those who do not participate in such groups. Thus, journalistic discourse is already identified with institutional and ideological acceptance, whereas “to speak as a fan is to accept what has been labeled a subordinated position within the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled or criticized by institutional authorities” (Jenkins 23).

Third, as a consequence of these first two conditions, the cultural geography of these groups remains for the most part distinct, with reasonably rigid boundaries between them. Though as mentioned above, professional articles sometimes become linked with fan discourses (metaphorically in both the internet technological and simple conceptual senses), most often one must seek out fan responses through one method of research and professional

⁴⁷ For example, Jenkins writes in *Textual Poachers* of “fans as readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture” (23). According to this understanding of fans, no great conceptual leap is necessary to include the work that journalists do—as chroniclers and interpreters of culture—as part of a “fan culture,” broadly defined.

⁴⁸ Producers can arguably be broken down further in any number of ways by *degree* of influence, too. The reason “authors” like Aaron Sorkin and John Wells are given that moniker has to do with their relative degree of influence over the specific form of the show that airs on NBC. But all the other “producers”—from the actors to the network executives to the on set crew—bear some of the responsibility for shaping the structure of the show’s text.

responses through another.⁴⁹ Surely there are some simple explanations for such boundary maintenance, not the least of which is the profit motive: institutions will be reticent to allow their intellectual property—in this case articles by popular critics and other journalists—to be reprinted or circulated online or in other venues without what they consider to be due compensation. However, this simple motivation supports a more insidious form of cultural gate-keeping, wherein some forms of commentary are tagged as “acceptable” and some as “other.” In the present study I tend to allow these boundaries to remain, but also attempt to recognize the ways maintenance of such boundaries should make us aware of the subtle politicizing of different viewer groups. Power is unevenly distributed among these groups. Maintaining a distinction between “journalists” and “fans” activates the dual possibilities that fans so-defined will be further marginalized but also that, if made sufficiently aware, readers may be more likely to recognize and struggle against such marginalization.

I have also chosen to use the term “viewer” to refer to all three groups considered in the project, including the program’s producers. This is admittedly not a standard application of the term, especially since I also draw on British and American cultural studies theorists who tend to separate the moments of production and consumption in the circuit of culture.⁵⁰ However, I have found this conceptual move helpful in two respects. First, and most prominently, because *The West Wing* was a serial drama, producers’ participation in the public discourse was ongoing. One imagines producers screening their own program, reading journalists’ reviews, even lurking in online fan forums, and then making public responses either directly or indirectly to all of them. As such, producers can be understood as

⁴⁹ Here access to producer and journalists’ discourses is relatively similar, since I have limited the current project to the promotional materials circulated by *West Wing* producers, which tend to circulate mostly in the form of interviews with journalists.

⁵⁰ See Hall, 313-319; du Gay, et al., 1-5.

“viewers” in that they participate in social and cultural practices of media consumption in much the same way (though not always in the same venues) as other viewers of the program. They have a privileged status among viewers, as I discuss in more detail below. But they are also quite similar to other viewers as well, and my use of the term in reference to them highlights this.

A second reason this move is helpful has to do with the argument some might raise that cultural production is limited to mass media like *The West Wing*. One can reasonably argue that producers of such widely circulated texts power and influence is significant when compared to other viewers, but practices of cultural production are employed by a wide range of cultural participants, among whom mass media producers are only a small subset. In this project I consider the professional writing of print journalists and critics and the casual online interactions of newsgroup forum participants. The texts circulated by these viewers also have constitute cultural productions. The power of these responses is more that of the textual poacher, but non-producers’ public discourse is far from powerless.⁵¹ Thus, it is more accurate to view producers’ cultural production in the public arena as less unique and more similar to the production of other public communities, like journalists and fans, who also make claims on the meaning of *The West Wing*. I address the potential and limitations of each viewing communities’ ongoing position in the public discourse about the series the central part of the project.

In the central part of this project, I address in much greater detail the questions I have raised above: How do quality television and the realism/fiction boundary organize and constrain the ways *The West Wing* has been read by viewers? How has cynicism as a

⁵¹ See de Certeau, xviii-xv, for a discussion of textual poaching.

contemporary American rhetorical style restricted certain kinds of interactions among some *West Wing* viewers? How has the interweaving of aesthetic and political judgments on alt.tv.the-west-wing helped to stave off the disengagement cynicism can promote through the production and maintenance of a community of judgment? Chapter 2 focuses on the practices, both discursive and more specifically material, employed by producers of *The West Wing* and the ways those practices constrain and shape viewers' responses to the show. In some ways, one could think of these as arguments, in that they are recurrent and consistent techniques to produce identification, to constitute the show and its meanings in ways that are advantageous to the producers. First, I consider the way interviews and public relations materials have been systematically shaped to describe the series as quality television. While that term is rarely if ever used in these promotional materials and interviews, they nonetheless represent an invitation to understand the show as potentially attractive to a certain kind of television audience: a "smarter" audience, more discerning. This audience is not coincidentally also frequently affluent, with plenty of disposable income, which makes them extremely attractive to network television's advertisers. The chapter then addresses how the desire to attract such audiences has either influenced or at the very least closely parallels the use of specific narrative and visual economies encoded into the text of the show itself. Far from arguing there is some inherent meaning embedded within the images themselves, I argue these practices have been selected for their already-constituted meanings as they circulate in American culture. (In at least one case—the decision to begin letterboxing the show during the second season—the practice was added later, effectively buttressing the show's association with quality television.) Finally, I consider the

implications of producers' attention to quality television as it impacts a consistent argument for its realism and how such conceptions implicate other viewers' understanding of the show.

I shift focus to a community whose work is often pushed to the periphery among media scholars, namely, print journalists, in Chapter 3. I argue there that this group of viewers, situated in some ways between producers and consumers (though cultural producers and consumers themselves), allow their concern over the questions of quality and realism to bubble up throughout their writing, but keep the process of deliberation over these issues hidden from public view, and therefore tend to leave these questions open-ended. Some have pejoratively referred to this group as "the popular press," but these popular critics, entertainment news journalists, and television reviewers have served a central role in the interpretation and circulation of cultural meanings of *The West Wing*. This is most accurate when one considers their role as intermediaries: journalists have institutional access to both producers and consumers—they can (sometimes) interview Martin Sheen as well as Wolf Blitzer (whose opinion on the accuracy of the set has been sought), but are also expected to provide an interpretation of the show based on the tastes of "average viewers."

However, journalists' responses to the series tend to project a much more cynical cast than either producers or fans. First, their anxieties over the extent to which the series should count as quality television indicates a discourse about the validity of television as a medium. Arguments about *The West Wing* spill over into arguments about television in general and whether it has paid enough cultural dues to finally (or ever) be accepted as a viable cultural form. At stake in these arguments is a serious question of class power, since television has until now been the domain of the working class but now appears set to become appropriated by middle class tastes. The extent to which journalists are able to sustain a community that

affords them a venue to develop fan citizenship comes as a direct consequence of their professional roles and their implementation of cynicism in their daily lives.

Second, anxieties over the apparent degree of realism of the series indicate a discourse about whether fictional television *should* even attempt such realistic portrayals. In this chapter, I also consider how in *The West Wing*, as a fictional television drama, there need not be much or any correlation between the topics the show addresses and current government policy and procedures. Nevertheless, many journalists write about whether its realism is relevant enough to return to as a recurrent theme in the texts they produce. At stake in these arguments is a crucial question about whether having a realistic portrayal of the presidency is appropriate and whether it somehow adds to or takes away from the social power of the actual presidency in the process. Though their cynicism can work as a different voice with which to circulate their critiques of television and politics, it more often works against the fellowship, tolerance of dissent, and willingness to blur conceptual boundaries that support more robust conceptions of deliberation.

Chapter 4 focuses primarily on responses to the series posted to the newsgroup, alt.tv.the-west-wing.⁵² Responses here are much more personal, open-ended, subject to revision and often quirky, and as such they reveal another dimension of the range of responses to *The West Wing*. This chapter argues the most dynamic response to *The West Wing* occurs online, for three reasons. First, participants in the newsgroup most fully embody a community, in that they communicate with one another openly and intensely about situations in their daily lives: they are more tolerant of dissent, and they are more open to humor and play. Second, the knowledge they circulate is situated and open to contest by

⁵² I will also take a significant detour here to discuss posts to soc.history.what-if regarding *The West Wing*. The analysis, however, has significant implications for and can provide some illumination for my analysis of alt.tv.the-west-wing.

other members of the group. While early iterations of shared knowledge may be slightly or even wildly variant, over time the community's willingness to return again and again to reworking that knowledge means that in context, it becomes more and more valid for the group over time. Third, given their marginal status and lack of direct access to institutional power, they must rely on their judgment, rooted in practical wisdom, to make decisions about the show and their feelings toward it. They attend to one another's admittedly incomplete arguments about the show, and use these fragments to produce a patchwork of interpretations about the show's meaning and by extension, its value to them. However, their responses are also prone to a kind of hyper-awareness of context that leaves them sometimes open to the critique of narrow-mindedness and tunnel vision. I address both the benefits and detriments of the particular kind of interaction the virtual space of the online forum promotes.

This chapter also addresses how the specific tactics that articulate viewer perspectives on political culture highlight the ways discourse operates to trace the boundaries of what is acceptable talk amongst fans of a show that features political culture. The show has become one place where these viewers can articulate their sense of what political dialogue and engagement can mean in a contemporary mediated society. Finally, this chapter considers some of the issues involved in the complex question of how individuals with fractured identities—in this case, “fans” and “citizens”—come to hold certain beliefs and values and then change them over time, and what this means for one's status as a viewer, consumer, and citizen.

In the final chapter, I consider in depth two prominent concepts that develop from this project: “communities of judgment” and “fan citizenship.” As “communities of judgment,” each of the three groups of viewers I consider shows a resistance to political

isolation and cynicism, though in markedly different ways rooted in their differentiated social and cultural contexts. I also explain why these participants strive to practice some form of what I call “fan citizenship.” I describe how these two distinct aspects of one’s public character, fandom and citizenship, find fertile ground in communities of judgment that allows them to inform each other and provide a more robust context for democratic participation. In addition, I show how the intermingling of aesthetic and political judgments promotes a willingness to accept more mutable boundaries between otherwise stable categories such as politics and entertainment or reality and fiction, and why this is beneficial in the current historical moment. Together, these insights suggest that an understanding of “communities of judgment” and “fan citizenship” helps us to better understand the ways we enact a variety of practices in contemporary public life.

I begin with what is for almost all those involved the object at the center of all of these questions: the contours of *The West Wing* itself.

Chapter 2

“The West Wing”’s *Producers: Articulating Quality Television and Politics*

Network television producers have access to an immense amount of resources, and they are invested with the power to make almost every conceivable decision about the details of the series’ material form. This decision-making process does not occur in a vacuum, to be sure. Producers of *The West Wing* have considered at some length the potential implications of things like the medium for the series (film or video), the role of the president in the series (originally quite small, at least until the first episode aired), and even the date upon which to actually air it (the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky Scandal seems to have delayed a series otherwise ready to begin production). All of this suggests that a serious study of the cultural role of *The West Wing* would be incomplete without consideration of the factors that drove the important decisions about the series’ material form.

However, producers’ interpretation of the series’ role is important in another respect. As the decision-makers behind the series, their public voice makes a sustained argument for how the series should be understood. As I explain below, producers are especially univocal in their public discourse about the role of the series, even in the face of cynical and contrary critiques of their position. When Aaron Sorkin says the series is “a valentine to public service,” he invites his audience to identify with a specific conception of the series and to resist identification with others (qtd. in Weintraub 6B). That conception is remarkably uniform when compared to the myriad of nuanced positions articulated by journalists and online fans. Thus, the producers take the opportunity to enter into the ongoing dialogue about the series’ cultural role alongside and after each episode airs. The road to understanding what impact, if any, *The West Wing* has had on contemporary U.S. culture

runs directly through the series' visual economy and its producers' participation in the ongoing dialogue about it.

Specifically, the series' producers consistently invite other viewers to identify with the show as politically realistic and as an exemplar of high end or quality television. Viewer responses are not determined by such practices in any totalizing way, but they are significantly influenced by production discourses and structures of representation.⁵³ In this sense, the practices employed by the producers in the process of encoding the text must be understood before we can assess the nature of other viewers' conceptions.

In this chapter I argue first, that "quality" has been consistently mobilized as a guiding theme for the show's producers, and that this theme has been central to an interest in producing a predominantly educated and affluent audience for NBC's advertisers. Second, I discuss the manner in which the specific visual economy deployed within the text of *The West Wing* encourage these readings, i.e., how the particular brand of televisuality mobilized by producers assists in positioning the show as "for" certain viewers and not others. Third, I show how "realism" becomes figured as a facet of the show's quality, a marker of the producers' willingness to pay great costs to achieve a certain stylized effect that affluent viewers can both easily recognize and cheerfully consume. This stylized realism is in many ways strikingly different from the realisms of the documentary/news tradition and the hyper-aware reality television genre.⁵⁴ But it is the sense that *The West Wing*'s fictional construction of the landscape of contemporary U.S. politics can be identified with the actual

⁵³ Here I am drawing on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (reprinted in *Media Studies: A Reader*), including his subsequent comments on its incomplete formulation in the original piece. As the reader's editors, Paul Marris and Sue Thornham point out, Hall realized that, while encoding is one moment in a circuit of cultural production, it is a privileged one: "...I don't think audiences are in the same positions of power with those who signify the world to them" (10).

⁵⁴ For a discussion of the realism of documentary and news, see Fiske, 21-47 and Corner 27-28.

political landscape that is at the center of the way the show mobilizes its brand of realism, and thus promotes particular effects on viewers. In general, producers encourage an understanding of the show as directed at an educated, affluent, discerning audience.

“The West Wing” Producers Agree: It Is Not For Everyone

When the first episode of *The West Wing* was broadcast in 1999, media outlets had been creating a buzz about it for weeks beforehand.⁵⁵ The early word was this would be a show to watch (literally and figuratively), a weekly hour-long drama that would raise the bar for quality television in the United States. It was named “Outstanding New Program” and “Program of the Year” at the 16th annual Television Critics Association, described as “the best show on TV” (Owen D4), and won Best Series from the *Electronic Media* annual critics poll in 1999 and 2000 (Freeman16). In all of this, one thing was clear: *The West Wing* was quickly becoming understood by producers and audiences as a show discerning viewers *ought* to watch.

In the contemporary era of narrowcasting, quality programming is a genre with the capacity to attract an audience with appeal to producers and advertisers alike: educated viewers with cash to spend. To the extent that such a category is identifiable and sustainable, the situation is good for advertisers, which is by extension good for the networks and beneficial to the producers themselves. This is because being able to outline the demographic makeup of an audience allows marketers to persuade advertisers to spend a larger portion of their advertising budget: television networks can more readily claim to have

⁵⁵ See, for example, Kloer, Mason, “Check Out the New Fall Goods,” and Huff.

streamlined the process of identifying and luring specific audiences, making it more efficient.⁵⁶

Given the nature of this arrangement, shows that are able to draw connections between themselves and the most coveted demographic groups flex the most programming muscle. Such shows have relatively greater power in a narrowcasting environment than shows whose producers are unable to demonstrate connections between them and a particular demographic. Within this environment, *The West Wing* quickly received television's most coveted accolade: "'most upscale audience' of any show on television" (Stanley). It has continued to stand among a small cadre of programs on primetime network television that industry professionals regard as "quality." Amidst the struggle to maintain such status, *The West Wing* has participated in a number of strategies of representation that together draw our attention to the specific visual economy used to reproduce within the text certain markers of quality television. Together, these markers argue for a degree of meaningful identification between a particular category of viewers and that text, and in some cases actively collude against other kinds of viewers. These production strategies have been prevalent since the show first aired in 1999, grew with it over the years, and may have slightly fallen since the change in production leadership in 2003.

Before I turn to these materials, though, I wish to say a word about the nature of "quality" as a term for analysis. Producers of *The West Wing* do not always use the term when explaining why they think their show is deserving of praise, and so it can be hard to conceptualize what exactly we are talking about when we say "quality television." As I discuss in Chapter 1, Thompson's generic approach offers a helpful first step, but since it

⁵⁶ This argument is central to Joseph Turow's *Breaking Up America*. See also Dallas Smythe's "On the Audience Commodity and Its Work" for a Marxist analysis of the television/advertising relationship.

works like a snapshot of U.S. culture, it posits quality as a more or less static category, eschewing any sense of its ongoing and constructed nature in favor of a more stable and unchanging box within which we can categorize certain shows. By contrast, Feuer, et al. provide a more contextual account of how quality came about as a separate category. However, their historical approach is relatively descriptive, and as such leaves us with a somewhat overly-specific account of this thing called quality television. Each of the viewer groups I address here manifests a different conception of quality television and its analogues. I attempt to contextualize each group's working usage as I engage each of them.

Among producers of *The West Wing*, the term and its analogs are most frequently mobilized as generally signifying “what should be attractive” about the show. *The West Wing*'s high production values⁵⁷, its recurrent attention to character development, its rapid-fire and well-researched dialogue, are all criteria that can and do suffice as markers of quality for viewers. Whatever a viewer might enjoy about the show is often brought under the umbrella of quality as both a defining characteristic of the show and the term itself. In some ways, then, according to its producers, whatever quality television is, *The West Wing* is it, and can be defined over and against other shows that are precisely *not* those things. The category of “quality” remains a relatively fluid and open one (despite the claims of scholars like Thompson), a box into which any number of practices and techniques can be tossed. As a result, we must pay attention to the ways the cluster of terms associated with quality (including “sophisticated,” “intelligent,” and “powerful”) are articulated rhetorically through practices of speaking and writing employed by various groups as they struggle to take possession of these terms in contemporary culture.

⁵⁷ “Production values” is a common industry term that may be defined as “the value of a text relative to the money spent on it.” In the case of *The West Wing*, the value against which such claims are measured is certainly in relation to its ability to reproduce the “film look,” as I discuss in more detail below.

However, there is some consensus about *who* is attracted to whatever combination of styles and content quality might be, and that is the “upscale audience.” “Upscale—a combination of the selectively affluent and the genuinely affluent—became one of the hot-button advertising terms of the ‘80s and ‘90s” (Turow 59). This group is a recognized boon for producers interested in attracting certain advertisers, who are in turn seeking certain audiences. The process of bringing audiences to advertisers has been considered by many critics as the hidden agenda of television programming for some time, but it is not nearly as precise or straightforward as advertisers or producers would like it to be.⁵⁸ Though one journalist went so far as to equate “upscale” with “rich,” regardless of the way viewers appear to define the term it is often used to indicate entire groups of audiences.⁵⁹

In light of this, we can now turn to the public texts of the producers themselves. How do they attempt to shape reception of *The West Wing*? What criteria for “quality” occur repeatedly among their public statements (most often, in published interviews), and what ideological work do such criteria appear to be doing for these producers? One reasonable place to begin is with the recognized and professed “author” of the show, Aaron Sorkin. Though auteur theory has fueled intense critique among film and media scholars, James Naremore argues persuasively that authorship continues to make sense as a mode of intellectual criticism because it remains a powerful organizing trope for many if not most viewers.⁶⁰ Drawing on Stuart Hall’s language, the role of authors and producers in the

⁵⁸ Ang (1991) makes this argument in an extended form.

⁵⁹ Richard Huff, TV editor of the *Daily News*, wrote in August of 2002: “NBC not only drew the most viewers of any broadcast network last season, it boasted the richest ones to boot, according to a new survey of median incomes. And, as last year, its drama “West Wing” posted the most upscale audience of all.” This configuration nearly equates “richest” with “most upscale.” This definition of “upscale” is prevalent elsewhere among journalists as well.

⁶⁰ See Naremore (in Miller and Stam 2004). As he explains, for media critics, it is most helpful to maintain a vigorously debated canon through which scholars and critics can embody an evolving understanding of the work of various media producers.

constitution of meaning is not totalizing but rather “preferred”: authors have greater power, relative to audiences, to promote certain readings of texts. The series’ producers have used this power to invite audiences to read *The West Wing* in particular ways. Take, for example, Sorkin’s response to criticisms about an overly left-leaning agenda:

“Here is a show with no gratuitous violence, no gratuitous sex ... It celebrates our institutions, it's a valentine to public service and has featured the character of the president of the United States kneeling in the Oval Office and praying. It seems to me their difficulty with this show is that it's populated with characters who from time to time disagree with them politically. And if that is to be the criterion now for what is acceptable artistic expression in this country, we've got to redo everything” (Weintraub 6B).

Sorkin here attempts to calm what John Corner has argued is the most significant reason for television research, “anxiety about its influence” (4). Sorkin’s argument favors viewing the show as anything but detrimental. The “valentine to public service” is something to be lauded and watched endearingly, not with a sidelong glance. For Sorkin, the qualities of the show that make it quality television are clear and unmistakable.

Along with Sorkin’s public comments on why the show might be valuable, other producers, such as Thomas Schlamme and John Wells, as well as actors and hired political consultants, have talked about the show in public relations/marketing articles. These interviews frequently highlight some of the same criteria proposed by Thompson. In contemporary media industries, everyone associated with a program is assumed to have an interest in promoting it, and seeks to align their descriptions of it with markers of quality if possible.⁶¹ This alignment allows marketing for a show to develop a cultural head of steam, often with the hope that positive press will attract more viewers. The quotations below are a sample of the much broader array of praise the show’s producers have mobilized:

⁶¹ In reality, any individual member of the production team may disagree with any number of specific aspects of a program. However, this makes the high degree of similarity among the various materials presented here that much more remarkable.

[Sorkin] told a gathering of TV critics in California last summer that his only goal was to turn out decent and entertaining TV (Storey E1).

But the characters in 'The West Wing' are drawn with sophistication and accuracy. It's not entirely demeaning to people in politics. And the plot lines are pretty accurate, too (Anderson, R. E8).

NBC will most likely start branding Wednesdays as its "quality" night of television. "This is a show that fits perfectly with 'The West Wing' and 'Law & Order' and will provide viewers with one of the best nights of television, start-to-finish, on any network in recent memory," Ancier said. Sassa said the network was evaluating new marketing campaigns for the night. "It's a compelling night of good television," Sassa said (Schneider).

The West Wing producers and Warner Brothers and NBC network executives actively positioned the series as quality television. In addition to the explicit reference to quality by the journalist above, the producers' language—"decent," "entertaining," "sophistication," "compelling"—clusters in a way that both aligns with broader conceptions of television and dovetails considerably away from them. These producers want readers to know *The West Wing* is intended to be something viewers are drawn to: it "compels" them back to their TV screen each week.

The process of making "quality" television is original, unique, time-consuming, and perhaps most importantly for *West Wing* producers, does not always work. For the producers, the show is crafted by artisans, and while greatness is always the goal, the pressure of the weekly network production schedule can take its toll:

[Regarding the special episode that begins the third season, just after the September 11th attacks] "I didn't think that it was right that it just be a regular episode of 'The West Wing,' that people be tearing around the corridors and flirting with each other and being glib," says Sorkin. "Some sort of respect had to be paid to the event that just happened." But, he admits, "I don't think it was a good episode of 'The West Wing.' ... I'm not even sure it was good television" although "its heart was in the right place" (McCollum).

And yet, the expressed goal is to “captivate” viewers through “timeless” stories:

"But I'm not this social studies teacher who's taken up this pulpit. . . . I don't want to be too big for my britches. I seek only to captivate for one hour the people who have been good enough to give me their attention. And I'll do everything I can to achieve that" (Waxman C1).

"Sorkin says this series is not timely. 'The Amy Fisher Story' is timely. This story is timeless. People have been writing about the flaws and foibles under the cloak of power for hundreds of years," said [Rob] Lowe (Williams, W. 6).

To describe the series from the producer's perspective is to work toward explaining how it is both similar to and different from other programs:

"There are lots of places to go on the dial where everything gets wrapped up in 42-and-a-half minutes," said Wells. "That was never the intent of the show. ... this is a long-term examination of an administration" (Elber).

Thus, according to the public interviews of its producers, *The West Wing* is television, but better. “Compelling,” “timeless,” and “a long-term examination,” the producers hope readers will understand the show as something that exceeds previous notions of the medium's capabilities.

This kind of gushing promotion is the *lingua franca* of Hollywood-style business, in which an unwritten rule is that you never say anything bad in public about your co-workers or your work environment. But the important element to catch here is that all of this promotion points toward an understanding of the series as a *certain kind* of program: the use of markers like “timeless” and “sophistication” are flags that point toward the very same kinds of criteria both Thompson and Feuer use while simultaneously bracketing other kinds of positive praise. For example, nowhere among published interviews in popular newspapers can one find indications that to produce the show felt “silly,” “screwball,” “brassy” or “loud.” These actors and producers are hard at work on some serious stuff and would not be caught dead describing their show as “frivolous,” or “frothy.” “Entertaining,” yes, but in a

way that is deep and thought-provoking. Such fluffier accolades, though frequently used to describe the positive benefits of other kinds of television, are effectively scrubbed out of any public discussion of *The West Wing* by its producers.

The producer's public discourse thus advances a consistent narrative designed to emphasize the reasons a viewer might choose to watch the series or an advertiser to pay to advertise during it. Rhetorical theory offers a useful caution here in Maurice Charland's "constitutive rhetoric," in that *The West Wing*'s producers have sought through their very language to limit public conception of their program as anything other than quality television. Such "discursive effects that induce human cooperation" (133) as these producers' publicly sanctioned narrative about the series seek to lay a foundation for understanding it in a particular way. Producers enact a process of identification with the series as quality television through this narrative to encourage certain segments of television viewers to identify with the series.

Thus, attention to Charland here is helpful because he cautions against understanding constitutive rhetoric as all-powerful simply because it is prior to persuasion. *The West Wing*'s producers' do wield considerable power when it comes to shaping the public discourse, but that power is not totalizing. Even though one must already be a subject in order to speak, that does not imply "that one's subject position is fixed at the moment one enters language. Indeed, the development of new subject positions, of new constitutive rhetorics, is possible at particular historical moments" (141). Given this, it is important not to overemphasize producers' power to shape the rhetorical ground on which the series is understood. As I argue in Chapter 3, journalists are sometimes able to resist a conception of

The West Wing as quality television, especially when it becomes articulated with political realism.

Producers' interest in whittling the audience, in pre-configuring reception through contextualization, is also deeply connected to a process of narrowcasting that has become quite prominent among television programmers and advertisers during the 1990s. Joseph Turow provides one helpful critical perspective on the implications of this kind of "breaking up America" in his book of the same name. In it, he evaluates the nature of current advertising practices, particularly among what were formerly called mass media, and argues these practices have significantly altered the direction of contemporary media production:

The fundamental changes taking place in the television industry have been leading national advertisers, along with their ad agencies and media firms, in unprecedented attempts to search out and exploit differences between consumers (4).

He further describes the way certain key audiences for advertisers, including upscale audiences and baby boomers, were the most vigorously divided and targeted, with the marketer's ultimate hope being an interest in certainty: that the product you have advertised is being seen only by your target audience.⁶² This practice, which Turow calls "signaling," encourages viewers to identify the product or brand as associated with certain kinds of consumers. This helps advertisers, for whom the ideal is not to reach a broad, undifferentiated audience, but rather a specific group with easily identifiable demographic characteristics. Once such a group has been identified, the logic of moving units of product along predefined avenues of distribution (selling in certain stores that have been advertised on certain channels and programs) becomes relatively easy to grasp and implement. Upscale audiences stand out for advertisers because they have more "disposable income." They are

⁶² Turow explains why advertisers prefer series that not only invite certain audiences but discourage others on 107-108.

also perceived by advertisers as more “discerning,” meaning they are willing (or more likely, able) to take time to research and compare goods before buying them.

The fact that some of these same advertising tactics are surfacing in the ostensibly ad hoc comments of *West Wing* producers indicates two possibilities: that producers participate in the same kinds of targeting strategies as the advertisers who buy their air time, or the process of cultural production is itself more complex than simply articulating one’s ideas and beliefs.⁶³ Some combination of the two is the most helpful perspective. The extent to which the producers’ comments about the show reflect a desire to frame it as worthy of discernment is clear in the excerpts cited above. As such, we might reasonably conclude that, even outside the more thorny question of intent, the rhetorical effect of all of this discursive positioning is to package the show in some ways pre-constituted as quality television. Especially for those viewers who read interviews with producers, a clear picture of the series emerges that need not be explicitly heeded, but surely becomes part of the context within which viewers interpret the series.

“The West Wing” Expresses Its Own Televisuality

The published interviews of *The West Wing*’s producers provide a clear picture of the specific ways they would like viewers to interpret the show. However, the representations of the series itself, created by its producers, also constitute an important voice in its public discourse. A number of other strategies of identification are at work within the text of the program, encoded into a visual economy of its formal style. They are a fundamental aspect of the way the series is understood by viewers. Audiences rely on practical knowledge of what has come before, particularly in terms of conventions employed in previous programs,

⁶³ Perhaps there is also the possibility that everyone who works on the show is completely pleased with it, but Rob Lowe’s highly publicized exit and considerable public debate over salaries argue heavily against such an interpretation.

to assess the status of what they are watching in the present. This intertextual relationship among cultural artifacts serves as a web within which viewers can understand strategies, tactics, and references (both subtle and obvious) to other texts about which each new text asks them to recall.⁶⁴

The West Wing, like all media texts, arrived within this already constituted framework of social and cultural discourse. From the perspective of the producers, this new visual text needs to be both original and at the same time familiar to television audiences. When it came time to produce the first and subsequent episodes, concrete decisions had to be made about how those images would look and, by extension, to whom the show would be addressed. The freedom of individual viewers to interpret texts is often highly constrained by their preferred readings. Add to this the strong profit motive behind commercial television, and one begins to see that for the producers, the question becomes how to imagine their audience, and how to create a formal code with which that audience can easily and unproblematically identify.⁶⁵ The specific contours of a series' visual economy can tell us something about the potential contours of audience identification. Thus, we need to trace the way the narrative and visual economy of *The West Wing* are shaped to invite viewers to identify the show specifically as quality television.

This approach has a long history in media studies. Rooted in literary analysis, close textual analysis has been undertaken by scholars at least as since the discipline first

⁶⁴ For more on the concept of intertextuality in television culture, see Fiske 1987, chapter 7; for the connections between intertextuality and quality, see Jim Collins' chapter on postmodernism in Allen.

⁶⁵ There is a relative dearth of work on how exactly television producers develop and implement their concepts. While film producers often participate in a public and semi-mythic disclosure of their production methods through behind-the-scenes featurettes, television producers and executives are much more cagey about sharing the details of their craft with scholars and journalists. However, in works like Todd Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time* and Ien Ang's *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, the notion of "knowing your audience," or imagining you can know it, is frequently cited by television staff as a worthy and crucial goal for all those who hope to create successful television.

coalesced. However, some have attended more directly to the way such a visual economy tends to work diachronically across multiple bodies of viewers (as opposed to a single clever reading of a single text in relative cultural isolation). John Caldwell has discussed a number of such elements of “televisual” style in his book, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*. Though he makes no mention of rhetoric and is not known as a rhetorician, there is a rhetorical sensibility in the way he addresses this visual economy: how the use of certain kinds of stylistic modes allows television producers to encourage (or make arguments for) understanding television in certain ways and to resist others. In essence, Caldwell argues that the visual economy works as a procedure for constituting specific kinds of identification with the programs within which those practices are mobilized.

Such an argument allows him to recognize a limited array of “televisual” styles, such as the “Loss-leader” (160-192) and “Trash” (193-222). As he argues, certain historically specific technological, economic, and cultural factors are at the root of these developments. For example, electronic and non-linear editing and new film stocks are two of many technological changes to the ways television has been produced that have brought about a subsequent change in the style of television as a medium (81-88). Thus, the relationship between viewer consumption patterns, practices of production employed by producers, and specific technologies all exert influence on the meanings specific representations take on.

Elements like these are no less influential in the case of *The West Wing*. The representations in the series do not appear out of thin air or spring fully formed from Aaron Sorkin’s head. Rather, they work culturally as another set of markers for viewers, akin to the interview materials described above, to locate the place *The West Wing* will fit within a complex cultural grid. Below, I consider four important aspects of the visual economy

consistently employed in *The West Wing* to mark it as quality television: almost sole use of single film camera; heavy use of mobile camera or Steadicam; a dark and somewhat more moody lighting scheme; and widescreen, letterboxed format. Each of these practices have already been employed by producers in other television programs. In becoming part of the representational framework of *The West Wing*, they come together as four facets of a wider ideological formation: that *The West Wing* should be found by viewers consistent with the evolving standards of quality. To the extent such a formation can be sustained, producers believe they will find themselves with a well-defined audience of primarily educated and affluent viewers whom they can confidently sell to advertisers.

Single Film Camera

The use of a single film camera—in contrast to the three-camera studio setup common in news, soap opera and situation comedies—has been a facet of hour-long dramas since the 1970s. But it was with *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987) that the single camera began to be used for programs that had also been dubbed quality television. At the time, this was seen as a means to bring something of the “film look” onto the television screen, a move that had added impact as the medium of film had already begun to be associated with art. By extension, television drama would hopefully be seen as less like a sitcom (where the practice never appeared) and more like the cinema. Caldwell makes a related point:

Achieving the so-called film-look in shooting style became a production cliché in the 1980s....Industry wide...there was an increased interest in transforming television images into complex, subtle, and malleable graphic fields....distinctive programming forms and shows like these provided the conceptual framework—that is, the audience expectation and the cultural capital—needed to effect a shift in the televisual discourse (87-88).

The cultural role of television was changing, and the use of film as opposed to video was one element that both allowed for and encouraged those changes. By the time *The West Wing*

arrived in 1999, there was likely to have been little if any discussion among producers as to whether the hour-long drama would be shot on film or video: while the sitcom continues to increase its percentage of film-camera programs, new hour-long dramas are almost exclusively shot on film.

As for whether and to what extent film-camera shooting actually does suggest quality to viewers, there is some room for debate. For example, all the awards given by the Viewers for Quality Television (VQT) between 1986 and 2000 (including multiple awards to *The West Wing*) were to dramas shot with single film cameras. Yet, there is little evidence to indicate VQT voters are representative of the larger viewing population. The use of a single camera is most significantly part of a visual move to remind audiences of the cinematic experience.⁶⁶ However, whether audiences pick up on this aspect of the program's visual style is less clear. By extension, whether viewers recognize any of these practices as criteria for "quality" is also unclear.

This cuts to the center of the problem with a category like quality television: if viewers maintain rigid standards for acceptance, it too easily becomes an inaccessible and elitist category; if they leave it open to any criteria, the category is flooded, reducing its potency as a cultural marker for savvy viewers. Arguably, film-look alone is business as usual for television drama. It does little to argue *for* the show as "quality," simply assuring that it will remain in consideration for the distinction. Given this, *The West Wing* employs an

⁶⁶ A strong though by no means airtight piece of evidence supporting this is the introduction of high-definition video into the film industry. There, significant emphasis has been placed on particular video algorithms that mimic the imperfections of film grain and the less crisp contrast ratios of film, even though other technical markers of quality (such as resolution) rival film. The emphasis in the industry so far has been on making video conform to the visual conventions and "look" of film, rather than to emphasize potential benefits of the inherent "look" of video.

array of formal practices that buttress its producers' claims to "quality," including extensive use of a fluid camera rig called a Steadicam.

Steadicam

The West Wing also uses its single camera in a particularly notable way, one that is quite different from shows like *NYPD Blue* and *Hill Street Blues*. In those series, the single camera is almost always handheld, which adds a documentary look to many of its scenes, as if the interaction among the characters were being captured "live," as they happened.⁶⁷ This sense of realism, of "captured" images as opposed to created ones, is a key element of the visual economy of these series. To many viewers, this formal style highlights the relationship between the fictional world of the drama and the actual world they ostensibly mimic. Such handheld camerawork promotes an agitated, jittery, and jerky style because of the physical limitations imposed upon a camera operator who must literally shoulder film cameras weighing dozens of pounds when loaded with film. The realism this kind of camerawork engenders among viewers can often be one of "liveness," in which the "moment," in all its imperfection, is privileged over an ability to retake a line reading or action over and over until perfected.⁶⁸

By contrast, *The West Wing* uses the Steadicam, a newer technology that allows handheld shots a far greater degree of fluidity.⁶⁹ Such camerawork combines what is for television producers two previously incommensurable advantages: the freedom to maneuver the camera in almost all empty areas of space with ease (such maneuver only requires a place

⁶⁷ The camera is usually carried by the operator on the shoulder, though in some rare cases it is cradled at the waist or even at arm's length near the floor.

⁶⁸ This is itself a misnomer, since most professional production relies on multiple takes to achieve its ends, and *NYPD Blue* and *Hill Street* are no different in this regard.

⁶⁹ This is made possible by a complex, counterbalanced harness the operator wears, which offsets most if not all of the shakiness associated with traditional handheld camerawork.

for the Steadicam operator to place her feet and room in space for the camera to exist) and the fluidity of motion previously only possible when cameras were bolted down on a cumbersome and restrictive dolly rig or even more constraining tracks. With the introduction of the Steadicam, camera operators have begun to use mobile framing more readily.⁷⁰

On *The West Wing*, as with a handful of other series such as *ER*, this has brought rise to what online fans have dubbed “peda-conferencing,” referring to the constant hallway maneuvering conducted by the cast.⁷¹ One scholar has even argued this perpetual movement is the glue that keeps the varied plot lines flowing smoothly in each episode.⁷² This is because the heavy use of Steadicam on the series allows the dialogue to continue while characters physically move from one part of the set space to another. Narrative economy is achieved at no expense to the temporal and spatial economy: the camera follows characters (or, more often, leads them) through space as they conduct the business of the plot.

Physical complexities overcome by introduction of the Steadicam entail some other compromises, however. Most notably, a permanent set like the one used on the Warner Brothers lot in Los Angeles for *The West Wing* requires special dimensions to allow easy access to all the possible spaces by the Steadicam operator (Justin). In addition, only specially trained Steadicam operators are familiar and experienced enough with the system to use it effectively, and are therefore usually hired specifically by producers at elevated cost to the production.⁷³

⁷⁰ It is now common to shoot scenes previously designed for the dolly or crane—such as a tracking shot of two characters walking down a sidewalk—with a Steadicam.

⁷¹ John Wells produces both series.

⁷² See Smith, 134.

⁷³ The entry for *The West Wing* on imdb.com lists at least seven different Steadicam operators beyond the other “camera operators” employed to run the standard film cameras.

These compromises suggest the Steadicam's role in the overall ideological effect the series' producers hope to achieve. Otherwise, the additional cost and extensive planning required to orchestrate the weekly, fluid implementation of the rig would arguably be unnecessary. The Steadicam has become almost ubiquitous in big budget film and television production, as a quick perusal of the crew of almost any contemporary production will indicate.⁷⁴ However, on most productions, it is employed as an extension of the Classical Hollywood style, in which its fluidity minimizes audiences' awareness of it. By contrast, many if not most critics and a fair number of online viewers make specific reference not only to the presence of the Steadicam but its rhetorical effect on them.⁷⁵ In the case of *The West Wing*, the sense that the camera provides unlimited access and fluid movement throughout the West Wing is a sign the viewer is being given special privilege. Here, the Steadicam works to encourage viewers to understand the show as an instance of insider access: the program creates the illusion one can float three feet in front of the faces of the most powerful people in the federal government on a weekly basis. The degree of identification with quality television as privileged, whether intellectually or politically, is heightened by the constant use (and promotion) of the Steadicam.

Lighting

In terms of technical specifications, the series seems to push the limits of what a standard television set can project: video has a lower contrast ratio than film, so to use film as the original medium is to acknowledge the intent to throw away at least some detail.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ See the Internet Movie Database (imdb.com).

⁷⁵ I discuss these responses in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

⁷⁶ Contrast ratio is the relationship between the darkest part of an image a medium can record and the lightest. When a higher-ratio medium like film is transferred to a lower-ratio medium like video, areas of the image that remain visible as distinct shades of very dark grey and black or very bright near-white blend into a single swatch of black or white in the final video version, obscuring detail captured on the celluloid. The October 2000 edition of *American Cinematographer* further notes, "Television traditionally has been known as the

Couple this with a lighting scheme that uses limited light sources, and we can again recognize implementation of a formal mode for some specific ideological effect. Thomas Schlamme, one of *The West Wing*'s producers, seems to take this as an unfortunate fact of film-to-video transfer rather than as a warning to change the overall lighting concept: "Truthfully, if you could see the shows that I finish on the screens that I look at, you would go, 'Wow, that really looks like a movie' ...It's beautiful" (Rosenthal 55). At stake for Schlamme and other *West Wing* producers in limiting the use of set lighting is the same reasoning behind using film in the first place: to promote a sense among viewers that the show sustains the visual style of cinema.

While many films shown in theaters do capitalize upon the wider contrast range of standard film stocks, the notion that "film looks darker" is a misnomer in two respects. First, many contemporary films are simply not that dark, especially in the genres of comedy and action, and in many independent films.⁷⁷ Even within a given film, only certain scenes may be darkly lit while the majority of the rest are not. Second, much of film consumption today does not occur in the theater but rather at home via video rentals or broadcast television. Film culture has thus developed a "schizophrenic identity," seeking to please both theatergoers and viewers at home (Klinger 2).

In light of this, we must ask why it is that dark lighting has become culturally coded as "cinematic," at the same time asking why a television show would aspire to such a label,

"bright" medium; the set is bombarded with light on the theory that the audience has to be able to see everything on the screen. Many of today's producers, however, prefer to leave something to the viewer's imagination. According to [*The West Wing* cinematographer Tom] Del Ruth, shadows not only serve to heighten the tension within a scene, but they also add to the composition within an individual frame."

⁷⁷ Comedy has long established a tradition of brightly lit scenes, both in order to more easily showcase comedian's expressions and physical comedy, and in some cases to heighten the sense of absurdity in a scene by contrasting it visually with reality. Action films are less consistent in this regard, but big explosions and outdoor car chases only add to the spectacle when brightly lit. Independent films are even less consistent here, but film stocks with especially wide contrast ranges are much more expensive than others, so producers on very tight budgets tend to light much more narrowly than more expensive productions.

even when that aspiration might actually turn off some viewers. Schlamme provides a clue in another interview on the subject of lighting in the show:

Now that TV's creators have the tools, the only barriers to excellence are pride and will....If you're committed to the quality, if you do not succumb to being mediocre, if your attitude is that this episode means as much to me emotionally as if somebody just gave me a feature [film], mountains can be climbed....I know we can make this look as good as we want to make it look (Holston 1E).

Here there is perhaps no clearer evidence of the intended connection between “quality” and “cinema” for the program’s producers. Schlamme argues being “committed to the quality” of a television show essentially requires you to pretend you are producing a film. To make it “look as good as we want it to look” necessitates trying to establish as many markers of the visual style of cinema as your technical and financial resources can muster. Using film is a no-brainer; the Steadicam replaces the dolly and track without sacrificing a permanent set; dark lighting requires viewers adjust their viewing environment to meet the needs of the series, and by extension, the needs of the producers. In Chapter 3, I show how some viewers have responded negatively to these kinds of impositions, and as such the use of dark lighting is yet more evidence of signaling on the part of the program’s producers. By forcing potential viewers to work a little harder to consume it, the series flags itself as less fluffy and more fussy: a costly acquired taste like so many other products also pitched to the “upscale audiences” the show’s producers actively court.

Widescreen

There are certainly a number of other elements of the visual text one could highlight that associate certain visual strategies with “quality television,” but I will briefly describe one more, one that takes us literally to the edges of the visual text. Much like the use of film and dark lighting, the choice to broadcast the show in a letterboxed format instead of the standard

television ratio is another aspect of the visual economy that signals to viewers the show has been positioned as quality television.

Starting with Season 2 and alongside other series like *ER* and *The Sopranos* (two programs that participate in the same strategies of representation typically marked as “quality”), *The West Wing*’s producers began airing each episode in a widescreen format. This meant that, for the vast majority of viewers whose televisions were the standard 1.33:1 ratio, the 1.85:1 ratio of the new episodes would show on their screens in letterbox format.⁷⁸ Since most television screens in homes between 2000 and 2006 were still in a nearly-square shape, the rectangular aspect of the original had to be shrunk to fit into those squarish boxes, with unused portions above and below. The process has been the standard solution for viewing on television sets films shot in any of the variety of more-rectangular cinematic aspect ratios used since the 1960s. Thus, again, the decision to switch to widescreen signals the suggestion that viewers should identify *The West Wing* with a certain kind of cinema.

One way viewers can avoid seeing the black bars when watching *The West Wing* is to purchase one of the new, widescreen ratio televisions now widely available. These televisions not only have ratios much closer to the 1.85:1 used by *The West Wing*,⁷⁹ but they tend to be larger than the typical televisions currently in American homes.⁸⁰ With *The West Wing*, the resulting image would not only be larger because it would fill a widescreen aspect

⁷⁸ These are the horizontal black bars that run the width of the television screen. They allow the viewer to see all of the original image instead of slicing off its left and right sides. The resulting image is much more rectangular than square like most television images.

⁷⁹ The typical widescreen television today is 16X9 (or 1.78:1), slightly more square than 1.85:1. This ratio was chosen for use in HDTV, a standard for broadcast that is set to become required for all American television broadcasts by 2007.

⁸⁰ While the average television’s diagonal measurement is around 30 inches, the newer widescreen televisions tend to start at 42 inches, though the much more expensive LCD widescreen TV’s range from 15 to 36 inches and many large plasma screens can be as large as 60 inches.

screen, but larger too because the typical widescreen television is larger on average.⁸¹

However, with this larger image comes, not surprisingly, a larger price tag. Thus, the visual economy *The West Wing* produces implies a class economy, in that expensive new entertainment technologies like large, widescreen television sets support validation of a set of monetary striations based on the household discretionary income needed to purchase them.

The move to letterboxing the series, then, is perhaps the single-most efficient way to signal to non-upscale viewers that *The West Wing* might not be for them: if you cannot afford to purchase an expensive television, you will probably be less than satisfied with *The West Wing*. As we will see, this is precisely how some journalists have interpreted the rhetorical position of the program's producers. By contrast, fans of *The West Wing* tend either to play up the benefits of using the widescreen format (more image detail, greater "scope") or dismiss it as an acceptable annoyance when taken together with the other aspects of the show.

All four of the formal practices I have just outlined contribute to the overall visual economy of *The West Wing*: encouraging affluent, educated viewers to continue viewing the series because it provides cinematic-looking episodes that suggest privileged, elite access and look especially good on that new widescreen television sitting in the living room. However, the conception of quality television producers encourage is specifically linked to a certain ideological formation of realism, one premised on two important factors: recreating the look and feel of earnest politicians working hard to do good, and buttressing the sense of privileged access to the political halls of power through a mobilization of paid political consultants (and their subsequent promotion in the press).

⁸¹ At least two journalists specifically recommend purchasing one of these expensive sets in order to watch *The West Wing*. See Lammer and Snider.

Realism = Quality—Sort Of

The discursive contours of quality television, as expressed in the public interviews of *The West Wing*'s producers and the visual economy of the episodes themselves, emerge as equating “good” television with television produced for affluent, upscale audiences, willing to invest money, time, space, and intellectual energy, and all in order to access the show in a way both entertaining and ideologically fruitful. However, the ideological work the series performs goes further. By linking its visual economy to political and social realism, through its on-going narrative about the goings-on inside the White House, the series extends viewers' sense of privileged access inside the normally impenetrable halls of power. The nods to such realism in the series' formal codes work to legitimize the program's political ideology. Here I do not mean the so-called “left wing” or liberal democratic politics, but rather the idea that public service at the highest level takes hard work and dedication just like viewers' own jobs do, even when performed in a more glamorous setting.⁸²

The degree to which the series appears to be *like* the actual political milieu of the White House and the federal government is a significant element of the producers' construction of the way *The West Wing* fits among the constellation of contemporary programs others have identified as quality television. The boundaries of *The West Wing*'s narrative universe are porous—fictional characters played by actors and actual political figures (sometimes played by themselves) intermingle in the diegetic space of the *West Wing* universe. Because of this, the program's producers need some method for negotiating the wide-ranging and sometimes complex cultural terrain of “realism.” The dialogue and

⁸² Fiske has argued television is more focused on the middle class (1987, 23). There is arguably no single shared value more fundamental to the social structure of the American middle class than the notion of hard work. By showing their characters constantly hard at work, producers gain some ideological leverage on their audience, broadly conceived.

settings have been created by its producers, but the text sometimes references actual politicians and journalists and quotes from actual philosophers and artists; the scene often looks strikingly similar to actual places in Washington, D.C. (for those who have been there). *The West Wing*'s producers actively influence viewers' interpretation of the show as "realistic" in a particular way that continues to attract (instead of alienate) the audience hailed by the other aspects of the text we have already considered.

For example, the handheld camera—as opposed to the Steadicam used in *The West Wing*—can sometimes cue viewers to read its jerky style as "realistic," in the sense that it is reminiscent of news reporting and home videos. As Caldwell notes, "the entertainment/drama versus news/reality worlds represent entrenched institutional differences in broadcasting" (259). These differences are often sustained by particular formal practices promoted by the various institutional constituencies themselves. Not only news crews, whose use of shaky, handheld cameras may emerge from a need to follow their stories spontaneously, but also the crews of so-called reality television actively encourage a specific version of realism through their refusal of such techniques as single camera and Steadicam. Though one might dismiss these discrepancies based on the difference in budgets between these programs and *The West Wing*, budget choices are themselves driven by aesthetic choices, which are rooted in ideological codes. The different manifestations of realism among contemporary U.S television programs can thus be identified as ultimately linked to specific ideological claims on the actual world.⁸³ What lies underneath the ways producers encourage audiences to identify *The West Wing* as "quality television" is an interest in

⁸³ Morley concludes that "there must be different realisms, not a single 'classic realist text' to which all realist texts can be assimilated" (1992, 67).

encouraging viewers to understand the world, especially the political aspects of that world, in particular ways.

One significant aspect of *The West Wing*'s evidence for quality, as understood from the perspective of its producers, is its attempt to represent a double image of realism: articulated with a commonly accepted notion of what doing politics in contemporary U.S. public culture is actually like, but at the same time dissociated with the visual economy of genres of television more commonly associated with realism and never associated with quality.⁸⁴ This is especially true with regard to cues to documentary style (such as film and handheld cameras). Instead, the "realism" at work in the show is both visual and conceptual. It is visual in the way the *mise-en-scene*, locations, and characters compare with the actual White House and its staff. It is conceptual and/or procedural in the ways the plotlines of each episode appear congruous with the audience's practical knowledge of actual political events in recent history.⁸⁵ The program's producers have developed a set of strategies for marrying a particular kind of "realism" with the concept of "quality television," essentially arguing that each informs and supports the other. In this case, "realism" is a unique blend of more traditional notions of empirical realism that emphasize mirroring actual reality and Ang's emotional realism, which emphasizes the extent to which characters act according to viewers' sense of actual humanity. The process of identification entails articulation of the program's representations with a specific set of ideological markers, which are themselves linked to the historical context in which they both arise.

⁸⁴ These include reality, tabloid, and trash television.

⁸⁵ This is similar to Walter Fisher's concept of "narrative fidelity": the degree to which audiences perceive that a narrative is like other stories they have encountered elsewhere (Fisher 8).

The Political Milieu

When *The West Wing* first aired in 1999, the US political landscape was both similar to and different from what it is today in 2006. For example, Bill Clinton was in office then and George W. Bush is there now: by almost any estimation, their approaches to federal governance are different, especially with regard to personal style, an element that figures prominently in *The West Wing*'s representation of the Presidency. Further, Clinton had been President since 1992 when he was elected over the elder George Bush. During the preceding years, political partisanship had increased, according to some critics.⁸⁶ This had brought about a political context in which Republicans and Democrats considered one another from across a self-imposed chasm, entrenched in a battle of political ideologies whose prize was the ability to steer the helm of U.S. governance into the 21st Century. (Or at least, these were the terms in which the increasingly partisan federal system was formed in the final years of the 20th.⁸⁷) It can be said, though, that the complex political negotiations familiar to the generation that brought about the legitimization of civil rights and the removal of troops from Vietnam, together with the kind of grassroots political organizing that supported such civic engagement, were things of the past in 1998, after Newt Gingrich had orchestrated the *Contract with America* and a centrist liberal President had taken office. Thus, the political landscape in general was muddled at best: one camp with a somewhat fatalist outlook grabbed hold of partisan in-fighting and pronounced politics hopelessly deadlocked; another equally fatalist camp saw an ultimate lack of political difference between Republicans and Democrats in the U.S. House and Senate (and White House) and declared the end to

⁸⁶ See Brooks and Frank.

⁸⁷ To make this claim is to bracket for the purposes of this essay the relatively narrow subset of the global political spectrum within which American politics lies. From the admittedly myopic American point of view, distinctions along the political spectrum between Republican and Democrat can appear quite vast.

democratic deliberation itself. These points of view, together with and perhaps spurred by the stacks of paperwork arriving daily at the U.S. Attorney General's office unearthing yet another scandal implicating the sitting president, highlight a mood of cynicism and hopelessness. Because of this, U.S. citizens were expressing many signs of weariness when it came to politics.

It was in this context that Warner Brothers began negotiations with Sorkin, a writer and producer whose half-hour comedy, *Sports Night*, had been pitched at the same time. According to Sorkin, the West Wing project had been put on hold because of the Monica-Lewinsky scandal.⁸⁸ It was a potentially hazardous new project for the 1999 fall lineup: a new hour-long drama about the world inside the White House.

This simple metaphor, that there is a world inside the White House, somehow different from the one we know, which can be captured through televisual representations and brought to viewers, belies a much more complex cultural context than might at first appear. As much of the commentary and discussion of the potential for such a show makes clear, the thought of representing the president on a weekly basis burrowed to the center of long-standing debates about the relationship between the "real" political world and representations of it. There had been some speculation among producers at Warner Brothers and NBC about whether the viewing public would be willing to sit for a show that depicted a president trying to solve political problems.⁸⁹ What would be required was a careful and meticulous group of handlers who could represent that "world" in a way that both the upscale audience and savvy Beltway insiders would find ideologically credible.

⁸⁸ In his interview on *The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer*, September 2000.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Probing the “Boundaries”

One critic used the phrase “reel life” as a way to suggest that the fictional Josiah Bartlet, played by Martin Sheen, could run for president in reality, and would at least be more likely to garner a nomination than Warren Beatty, who briefly considered an actual run for president (Saunders). The relationship between the current president and staff, their fictional counterparts, and the actors who play them is one that is inflected by a discourse regarding the distinction between the “real” world of politics and the “fictional” world of television. In Chapter 3, I address the ways this distinction is articulated among journalists with the cultural status of the medium itself. For producers, the discourse moved in a different direction: how to police the boundary so as to allow audiences to recognize *The West Wing* as realistic in a way that would not undermine or compete with the program’s status as “quality television.” Producers made such discursive arguments by explicitly linking the two.

Though many contemporary journalists have questioned the degree to which spin doctors, pollsters, image consultants and the like have reduced politics to a virtual reality, producers’ public relations materials stay well away from such assessments in favor of a clear distinction between “reality” and “Hollywood.” The program’s producers have spoken often on this topic, always willing to maintain a stable boundary between the fiction they produce and the actual world it reflects:

What makes "The West Wing" so remarkable is that it aspires to be realistic in a way that no other presidential series has before. “We want it to feel like a real White House,” [series creator and writer Aaron] Sorkin told TV critics this summer in Hollywood, “and not a television White House” (Lorando E1).

He’s not sure of the direction of "West Wing's" upcoming scripts, but Sorkin is certain he wants to take that road less traveled: separating his TV White House from the real thing (Williams, W. 6).

This relationship between reality and fiction is spoken of as if it is an ideal toward which the show's producers strive, though they may not always achieve it. A "real White House"—the "real thing"—is something easily outlined and maintained as a separate thing from a "television White House."

In practical terms, these two realms can be maintained even though significant similarities may exist. In order to separate *The West Wing* from "the real thing" while still making it "feel like a real White House," the producers have attended to a great amount of detail with the set construction and general work environment of the White House staff, while simultaneously retaining a tone former (actual) White House staffers and journalists say is more in keeping with the individuals as they knew them than the way the press portrayed them:

...we gave [CNN correspondent Wolf] Blitzer a tape of NBC's *The West Wing*, which debuted last Wednesday and continues tonight, for a reality check. How well does it capture both the feel and the details of life in the White House?

Wolf Blitzer--- "Some of it was silly. Some of it was pretty authentic" (Kloer D1).

Most White House staffers would love to work in the place television viewers see Wednesday nights on NBC's new series *The West Wing*. But they don't.... [speaking of *West Wing* décor] *The West Wing* misses reality in other ways ("Check Out the New Fall Goods" E5).

"It lends a human dimension to people in politics," [former press secretary Mike] McCurry says of the show. "Usually elected officials are portrayed on TV as dastardly guys with black helicopters in the desert. But the characters in '*The West Wing*' are drawn with sophistication and accuracy. It's not entirely demeaning to people in politics. And the plot lines are pretty accurate, too" (Anderson, R. E8).

For the producers, the opinion of current and former politicians about the "accuracy" of *The West Wing*'s visual and narrative style is an important element in their case for its quality.

To have the imprimatur of as many professional politicians as possible officially on the books, as in the quotations above, serves to validate the series in two respects. First, the use of figures like Wolf Blitzer, as publicly recognized experts on the “world” of politics, buttress the implicit argument made by the series’ visual economy. Second, the willingness of such experts to support the program publicly functions as an argument for its producers’ willingness to seek out such advice, something that appeals especially to educated audiences.⁹⁰

This is nowhere more evident than in the maintenance of a revolving series of political consultants, some of whom received writer credits on the series.⁹¹ This process is not uncommon in television drama: producers for *ER*, *JAG*, and *Law and Order*, among others, have also employed special consultants to help answer technical questions that might appear in the development of a particular episode. Seeing the same names in *The West Wing*’s credits as in a CNN or Fox News story only enhances the realist aesthetic. Encouraging recognition among viewers that the series provides insider access and insider knowledge is thus a key aspect of an overall strategy for audience production.

Producers of *The West Wing* do not appear interested in managing tensions activated by comparisons between fiction and reality. Producers’ public response of realism to the series is one in which audiences identify a high degree of similarity between its representations and the actual political landscape. This is important and necessary to achieving a “quality” stamp of approval from viewers, especially those who work in Washington, D. C. Through repeated public display of those aspects of the series that

⁹⁰ We will see in Chapter 4 how audiences like alt.tv.the-west-wing participants draw upon the relationship between *The West Wing*’s producers and political insiders to contend with the fiction/reality boundary.

⁹¹ David Gergen, Dee Dee Myers, Marlin Fitzwater, Ken Duberstein, and John Podhoretz have all been on the *West Wing* payroll at one time.

provide more realism for viewers, producers can suppress those aspects that are less realistic. But this strategy can backfire. For example, early in the program's history, much attention was paid to the dearth of characters who were not white and male. Though this could arguably be a facet of the series' continued attempts at realism (given the actual dearth of non-white and –male staff in the White House), it was not interpreted this way by many viewers, especially journalists. Instead, it was seen as yet another attempt to crowd television screens with white men at the expense of other, equally talented actors. While *West Wing* producers were originally quite vocal about their interest in “realism,” they relented readily to this critique of their cast, adding new characters and increasing the prominence of others.⁹²

In addition, some aspects of the quality style discussed above can work at cross purposes to the sense of “realism” expressed by some viewers. Both “peda-conferencing” and the dark lighting scheme used throughout the series have been highlighted by viewers as unrealistic elements when compared to the “real White House.”⁹³ It is perhaps more accurate to argue that the program's producers seek to constitute their own rhetoric of realism, one that can balance their interests in signaling the program's “quality” while at the same time appeasing a variety of viewer groups and constituencies, but especially educated and affluent viewers.⁹⁴

⁹² Charlie, the President's personal aide—played by Dule Hill, a young African-American actor—was added; Abby, the First Lady—played by Stockard Channing—was written into the series more frequently; in later seasons, a variety of other African-American and female characters were introduced and expanded.

⁹³ For example, Hamilton notes some D.C. insiders argue the series makes the staff seem more busy than their actual counterparts.

⁹⁴ It is ironic that few if any public responses to *The West Wing* accept it as entirely “realistic,” but instead take the partial realism the series actively produces and maintains as an opportunity to assess those aspects of the visual and narrative style that are not fully realistic, often using the disjunction as an opportunity to articulate “realism” with other issues that are important to them (such as the impact of the Clinton presidency or the value of political fiction). I discuss these responses in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the ways the various producers of *The West Wing* have actively promoted the series as quality television. The extent to which all the various texts emanating from the series' producers encourage identification among certain viewers highlights the way the series' visual economy works to constrain interpretation and meaning. When we look at the signaling practices encoded in the program's text together with the specific kind of promotional rhetoric present in public relations interviews, we see a multi-pronged strategy for tying the show to exclusive demographics. This kind of television is encoded to attract a certain kind of audience: one that is educated, affluent, and discerning, with enough disposable income, leisure time, and level of education to make the added effort necessary to decode certain aspects of the show's text.

Attention to producer's public statements about *The West Wing* indicates that they hope all viewers can see the amount of work and effort they have put into their show to make it "quality television," though they leave that term quite open-ended in terms of how it ought to be interpreted. Seeking to leave no doubt with audiences about this linkage, the program's producers use single film camera, heavy deployment of the Steadicam, a pervasively dark lighting scheme, the widescreen format, and double-pronged approach to "realism"—both in the sets and costumes as well as in the content of each week's narrative—in the hopes of securing recognition among "upscale" television viewers that theirs is a show not to be missed.

As the group of *West Wing* viewers with the most direct impact on its formal contours, producers are intimately associated with the production process, and by extension the encoding process that enables the text as such. The ancillary public texts they produce

also indicate a strong connection between the way the show is produced and a process of bringing affluent and educated audiences to their advertisers. These intended audiences are always in focus: if not explicitly, then implicitly, in the markers of “quality,” and buttressed by the categories of “cinematic” and “realistic.” They remain in focus because of the impact of economic factors in the individual lives of each member of the production team: they get paid to deliver audiences to advertisers.⁹⁵

It can then be argued that the text is constructed to promote a style commensurate with easily identifiable elements of a broadly cinematic “look,” previous (successful) incarnations of “quality television,” and a certain variety of realism that can be efficiently interwoven with these other criteria for “quality.” These elements suggest the producers do not really care what the show is about as long as affluent, educated people will watch. Sorkin even uses the category of “quality” to deflect other claims about the nature of the program’s political agenda. In response to a claim “that each week ‘West Wing sets out to restore public faith in the institutions of our government and to supply a vision of the nation’s common good that is heroically heedless of focus groups and re-election prospects,’” Sorkin maintained “his only goal was to turn out decent and entertaining TV” (Storey E1).

And yet, the specific way producers approach the thorny question of realism does seem to suggest these television viewers are not entirely driven by profit motives. In Chapter 1, I hypothesized that there is such a thing as a “fan citizen,” a social type somewhat unique to our contemporary cultural milieu and activated in unique ways by the circulation and consumption of *The West Wing*. Because of the powerful and relentless influence of commerce upon the daily decisions of the program’s producers, it is hard to conceptualize

⁹⁵ This is an admittedly reductive summary of the kind of Marxist critique of the structure of commercial media espoused in Smythe, Wasko, and McChesney.

them as effective “fan citizens”: viewers who articulate their own experiences with the text of the show and the views of others to attempt to understand contemporary American politics. The profit motive seems to get in the way.

But there is a thorough visualization of the core of politics in the United States that stands out. Given the extent to which the program’s realism is rooted in privilege—one that places viewers “in the room” with powerful men and women making decisions about the course of our country—the show nonetheless represents those men and women as fundamentally virtuous. There are always antagonists who oppose them, and those antagonists are often two-dimensional caricatures by comparison. But as many viewers—journalists, fans, and even some producers—have argued, the fundamental representation of public service and those who work for the federal government is of do-gooders doing good.

This is something consideration of the commercial imperatives driving *The West Wing*’s producers arguably would not imply. Instead, it seems to say something about the nature of U.S. television viewers generally, and *West Wing* viewers more specifically, and their sense of the ways popular culture and politics can and should be articulated with one another. This becomes especially salient if we are to resist the cynical break with the social that Sunstein, Putnam, and others argue is slowly creeping into our public life.

Understanding this problem through the lens of *The West Wing*’s producers can only provide a segment of the entire issue. To begin to see the ways the fan citizen makes these connections between culture and politics in more active and complex ways, we need to turn to another community of viewers who access these issues from a related but different set of perspectives: journalists and television critics.

Chapter 3

“The West Wing”’s Television Critics: A Cynics Guide to the Medium

Television journalists are paid to be critical. Ideally, they serve the broader community of television viewers by evaluating the vast constellation of televisual texts and reporting their conclusions to the public. American audiences have always been concerned with whether television has any inherent good beyond its “entertainment value.” Implicit in such language is the pejorative connotation associated with “entertainment,” which assumes too much pleasure can only have a detrimental effect on society. Surely, for anti-mass media critics like Neil Postman, the benefits of television begin and end with entertainment. A more nuanced but no less fervent attack on television’s role in contemporary culture draws from work in political economy and allows for the possibility of variety and diversity in television offerings, but argues nevertheless that market pressures resist such pluralism and virtually guarantee a pronounced univocality.⁹⁶ Here again, the language encourages a sense that television ought to be watched warily, if not openly disdained for its powerful ideological influence and constantly burgeoning percentage of the economy, both controlled by a highly concentrated and small group of corporate leaders.

When they write about *The West Wing*, print television journalists and critics express these and other anxieties about television as a medium and its relationship to politics as a set of governing practices. Unlike *The West Wing*’s producers, whose public voice in Chapter 2 was shown to be somewhat univocal, journalists write about the show from a variety of perspectives that resist any clear or obvious philosophical or aesthetic consensus. Journalists are typically willing to critique the show or elements of it, praising some aspects while

⁹⁶ See for example, McChesney (29-48) and Garnham (31-62).

questioning or even deriding others. In all of this discourse, journalists raise significant questions about its role, power, validity and influence among U.S. viewers and in U.S. public culture.

As professional television viewers, these print journalists enact some of the same kinds of fervor we traditionally assign to fans: they watch television intently and with intensity, and they write passionately about those programs they enjoy and admire. When it comes to *The West Wing*, their critiques seem to arise out of a desire to see something great on screen. As citizens, such journalists may attend to the series with even more focus, in that they consistently articulate some serious questions about the potential relationship between the fantasy of television and the reality of U.S. politics. Journalists blend these two characters—the fan and the citizen—in their responses to *The West Wing*, always with an intense critical eye.

For journalists, *The West Wing* sits at a crucial crossroads for the medium of television itself: will it be a cultural phenomenon at which we can look back in the future for influence and import or will it be a medium of silliness and fluff? This central anxiety, often expressed by journalists as just such a limiting binary operates behind a significant amount of the criticism and praise television critics have produced since *The West Wing* began. Journalists like David Shribman openly address these questions in tones of cynical detachment:

Surf through the channels when the premiere of "The West Wing" airs, and you won't know whether you're watching entertainment or politics. So finally, the line between entertainment and politics has been smudged beyond definition (A3).

I return to this excerpt in more detail below, but here we can already notice the ways the author encourages consumption of *The West Wing* as intimately tied to anxieties about an

imagined boundary between fiction and reality. An idealized notion of an easily identifiable boundary competes within the lines of this article with a cynical disengagement with the social function of the series. The author seems resigned to a state of affairs far short of the ideal of televisual (not to mention artistic) perfection he holds in his mind. Especially when the fiction/fact boundary begins to implicate the one between art and politics via *The West Wing*, journalists' public responses to the series become more and more animated.

This chapter identifies the ways journalists interweave questions of quality television and the most appropriate (or most effective) maintenance of the artificial boundary between fiction and reality into a powerful critique of the political limits of *The West Wing* as a source text in contemporary politics. If its producers encourage public recognition of the series' almost limitless possibilities for artistic expression and merit, journalists consistently identify its limits (even as they praise it). For these journalists, questions about the status of *The West Wing* are questions about the status of television itself: whether fictional politics are good for American citizens and whether television is an apparatus fit to represent them.

However, their influence is limited by their position within the circuit of culture. As professional commentators, individual journalists arguably hold more sway over decisions about *The West Wing* than most fans (especially those who participate in online forums). But their access to those decisions is indirect, and is necessarily based on an assumption that producers consume their texts. Possessing the credentials and platform to disseminate criticism, but lacking access to the machinery for actual decision-making, the rhetoric of journalists who cover *The West Wing* is consistently expressed as a struggle between idealism and cynicism, both about politics and about the medium of television itself. Without an opportunity to enter into ongoing dialogue and debate with a cross-section of

other concerned citizens, journalistic criticism bubbles over with disengaged and cynical jabs at the relationship between the institutions of television and politics.

This chapter proceeds in two parts. First, I return to the visual economy of the series, but this time from the perspectives of journalists and critics. I show journalists consistently address the same elements of the series' text as producers do, but they are far more multivocal in their evaluations of the merits of those practices. Some journalists respond negatively to these attempts at positioning *The West Wing* as quality television. These negative evaluations of *The West Wing* can be understood as facets of an underlying idealism about politics *and* television: behind the critique lies the hope that both politics and the medium of television can be better than any single incarnation of either, including *The West Wing*. Second, I look at the ways journalists position "realism," not as a facet of the argument for quality, as producers have, but rather as deeply contested territory regarding the relationship between entertainment and politics (often figured as "fiction" and "reality"). "Quality" and "realism" become articulated as separate but interwoven aspects of the same problem: whether it is possible to produce entertaining *and* responsible television about politics (where "responsible" folds back on realism: responsible representations of politics are understood as realistic ones). I then locate these apparently abstract discussions about politics and television within the historically specific context of the late 1990s and the Clinton administration post-Monica Lewinski, when a palpable "Clinton fatigue" became the setting for the intensity of journalists' critical and often cynical stabs at *The West Wing's* representation of the relationship between entertainment and politics. What emerges out of this contextualization is a sense that *The West Wing* was the right text for its time: a public opportunity to stoke the fires of discontent among American television viewers.

Quality Testing: Interrogating “The West Wing” and Television

Unlike the series’ producers, who seem to worry most about its reception by audiences, journalists seem to worry more about the medium of television itself. They are invested in a constant division and categorization of “television” into more discrete and manageable pieces. However one envisions slicing up the whole television pie, any notion of a boundary between quality and everything else is itself highly contested. Public discourse implicitly responds to questions like, “What can be considered quality on television?” “How should we evaluate a show’s quality?” and “What benefits accrue from consistent labeling of such an evaluative category?” To refer to a series as “quality” is to carve out an aesthetic space within the terrain of public culture. This process is fundamentally rhetorical, in that it requires social actors in a contingent world to make persuasive arguments for the necessity of the category “quality,” including its boundaries, contours, and efficacy, in comparison to those elements of television that are “not quality.” For journalists, this is not an easy task, hamstrung as they are by a professional interest in objectivity. We will also see this disengaged stance is further magnified by a generally cynical view of contemporary politics and civic discourse.⁹⁷

A discourse about “quality television” has been consistently mobilized and articulated by print journalists in reference to *The West Wing*. Perhaps in response to claims of television’s lack of sophistication, quality television in the U.S. context has always been a dialectical term at the heart of a debate over the inherent value of the medium. Since television’s first days, what we “should” broadcast—as opposed to what viewers want—has

⁹⁷ The literature in journalism is extensive regarding the importance of objectivity: even if it is understood in ideological terms as a kind of false consciousness, the fact that journalists are expected to adhere to that ideology is a fundamental aspect of contemporary journalistic ethics. For example, see Schudson (2001 165-167); Ansolabehere, et al (56-57). Kaplan and Mindich also provide in-depth histories of the development of objectivity in U.S. journalism.

been a central question.⁹⁸ Perhaps especially in light of the widening spectrum of tastes and pleasures available via cable and satellite television, what constitutes “quality” has become especially relevant to some viewers and policymakers. One journalist echoed Newton Minow even as he held out hope for shows like *The West Wing*, titling his article about promising new series in the 1999 lineup “A Wasteland Less Vast” (Martin 23). *The West Wing* has become solidly ensconced in this ongoing debate.

Since at least its near-sweep of the Emmys in 2000, *The West Wing* has held an almost undisputed claim to the top quality TV spot among network programs, at least among journalists who write about it. For example:

...the last two episodes, and especially last week's debate show, have been as good as any "The West Wing" has produced, which is to say as good as any hours on television (Kushman).

"West Wing's" upscale audience and critical acclaim add prestige and, presumably, value points that studio negotiators will almost certainly drive home (Collins).

“A show with both mass and class like *The West Wing* in its prime is handsomely rewarded,” [John] Rash replies, “but advertisers have never overly rewarded superbly crafted TV for its own sake” (Schmuckler).

These journalists take not only the series’ status as quality for granted, but its position among other quality shows as well. Analogues for “quality” suffuse these accolades: “prestige,” “class,” and “as good as any hours on television” invite readers to associate *The West Wing* with a category of television that ought to be highly valued. Further evidence for these placeholders of “quality” above comes when journalists link the terms of aesthetic judgment to more concrete indicators of success like its “value points” and advertisers’ “handsome” rewards. The status of the show as far as advertisers is concerned is clear: it is a show for which their ad dollars will be well-spent, because they can capitalize on the relatively tight

⁹⁸ Barnouw explains this as an argument that boiled over at the FCC once Minow arrived; see also MacDonald.

correlation between the show and its educated, affluent audience, targeting specific brands and disregarding others.

Possibly the most significant correlation to which journalists most frequently point is the relationship between the upscale audience and quality, as in the following description of Sunday night programming:

Sunday - a night favored by older, better-educated, upscale viewers attracted by what mostly older (read: baby boomer) critics have come to call "quality drama" - has become the designated area for such programs....Call it a safe haven or call it a ghetto, baby-boomer viewers are going to find out what it feels like to have their tastes marginalized by television in coming months. The prime-time landscape being mapped out these nights is looking more and more like a brave, new world for American entertainment television - one in which reality rules and the longtime staples of the half-hour sitcom and hour-long drama that formed the template of prime-time programming for 50 years take a back seat or, at least, learn to share (Zurawik 1D).

Here, the issue of the encroachment of "reality" television programming on the "staples" of fictional television and how it will affect "quality dramas" is identified, but the tone is neither idealistic nor antagonistic. Rather, it expresses a certain resignation: "Baby boomer viewers are going to find out what it feels like." And yet, while it does not sound good, the author offers no suggestions for how to fix the problem. As such, it is an example of how journalistic credos to deliver "just the facts" or to cover a story "objectively" lead to more than reportorial distance, but to detachment and disengagement.

The notion of "quality" has come to be synonymous with NBC's hour-long drama, and so in order to understand the ways the term itself has been positioned in U.S. television discourse, I will outline some of the techniques discussed in Chapter 2 to which journalists turn to make their case for the "quality" of the program: its use of single film camera, extensive presence of steadicam shots, low-key lighting, and the move to a widescreen presentation in the second season. Each of these aspects of the program's

visual economy has been interpreted by journalists as a marker of quality. In addition, journalists often attend to the writing of the series, including the way the cast delivers it. However, some journalists also identify each of these aspects of the series' formal style as undermining its ability to achieve the status of quality television. This holding back—no program deserves their highest praise—together with a persistent cynicism, constrains the extent to which “quality television” could ever rescue the medium from itself.

Lighting, Single Film Camera and Steadicam

As with the producers discussed in Chapter 2, journalists as a group also identify a set of values and stylistic elements that connote as “quality.” However, for journalists the process is fundamentally one of assessment, not production. Without access to the means of production but empowered to speak in the public arena through their credentials as professionals, journalistic rhetoric often strikes a middle position, with one foot in the language of critique and one in the language of praise. Among the community of television critics, we can see the nascent formation of the fan citizen, manifest as a competition between the extremes of idealism and cynicism. This competition gets worked out in the lines of their public responses to the series, especially in their collective and evolving response to its formal style.

One important element of that style is its low-key lighting setups or “mood lighting” as one reviewer calls it (Pennington E1). Again, as opposed to news programming and comedy series, *The West Wing* deploys very little light into its spaces, inviting comparisons to all sorts of other dark places by its viewers:

...what little action there is takes place in poorly lit offices, corridors, bunkers or that covered walkway at the back of the Oval Office. Only occasionally do we get to see a glimpse of Washington DC as a backdrop (Buncombe 1).

The set of "The West Wing" suffered an estimated \$100,000 in smoke and fire damage last week when a lighting box ignited a small blaze on the show's Warner Bros. soundstage. This was something of a revelation to the squinting viewers who strain to make out the shadows while keeping up with the show's fast-paced dialogue. Who knew there were lights on the set of "The West Wing"?... "The West Wing" is one of the most dimly lit shows on television. Even with auteur Aaron Sorkin's weekly stories of uplift and liberal optimism, it's a dark, dark program (Rosenthal 55).

Such comments will sound familiar to students of film history as well.⁹⁹ In either case, for journalists they seem to indicate a sense that the show's producers are willing to push the boundaries of decorum in their medium, which ultimately articulates with an interest in quality: *The West Wing* is "poorly lit"; it is "one of the most dimly lit shows on television." Its lighting is not representative of television as a whole, but rather operates as the outer limits of television's boundaries. This fits, once again, with Thompson's generic schema, as well as Caldwell's notion of loss-leader programming (especially given the overt use of "auteur" to describe Sorkin in the latter quotation above).

Journalists' praise (or blame) for the aesthetics of the image frequently bleed into their praise for the medium itself:

...the production values are the best on network television -- from the elaborate, burnished sets to the dynamic yet smooth camerawork (Last).

"I think what he's done is refined 'Sports Night,'" said Charlie McCollum, TV critic for the San Jose (Calif.) Mercury News. "While it's got the same sort of clever overlapping dialogue, it almost looks more like 'ER.' It has a very big canvas to work with. The opening 15 to 20 minutes of the first show really would not have looked out of place in a major motion picture. It was just really a wonderful piece of television. It has actually gotten better" (Ryan 1).

⁹⁹These kinds of articulations are reminiscent of early comments about *The Godfather*, itself something of a pariah at first because of its producers' interests in limiting its light levels. As one participant recalls, studio executives were almost appalled that "you can't see their eyes!" referring to the combination of low light levels and top-lighting, which added dark hollows under characters' eyebrows (from the film documentary, *Visions of Light*).

As with producers' expressions, the latter quotation from *Electronic Media* shows the ways the use of single film cameras have become linked discursively to one of the most common gauges of quality programming: the look of cinema. In both quotations above, there exists a clear reference to the status of *this* show in relationship with *all* television: "the best on network television" and "just really a wonderful piece of television." Journalists at some level accept the terms of "quality" established by producers through the program's visual economy.

And yet, on this question of camera use there exists also among journalists a cynical rhetoric that counterbalances any valued aspect of the show with the expectation of an eventual fall into territory that is either aloof or too close to actual life:

Snazzy single-camera scenes, machine-gun dialogue and, thankfully, not an intern in sight—yet ("Fall Preview" 58).

Even the camera work conspires in the simulacrum of privileged access--a typical sweeping, seamless shot will reel down a corridor, following a heated conversation, until the characters enter a busy office complex, whereupon the camera will whirl around to show us secretaries answering phones, staffers pacing with clipboards, people shouting from doorways, and so on, until we feel that the space really surrounds us. Anyone who ever longed to be part of a high-school clique, or belonged to one, knows how enticing exclusivity can be: "West Wing" gives us the illusion of fraternizing with the elect on their own turf (Wren 17).

These passages reveal a critical journalistic attitude toward two apparently problematic aspects of the show at once: in the former, the specter of the Clinton administration's "fall" in the form of an intern, and in the latter, the sense that audiences might become seduced through *The West Wing's* "enticing" ability to make us feel accepted and to be "in the know." It is in such passages that we see journalists stepping back from a complete embrace of the terms for quality encoded by producers within the text. Instead, they produce some resistance to those terms at the same time that they use them to structure their assessments of

The West Wing's virtues. The simple fact of the single film camera therefore produces an important element in journalists' fractured relationship with the formal style of the series.

Arguably, the most common citation of *The West Wing*'s uniqueness regarding its "look" among journalists is its heavy use of the steadicam. Journalists articulate the fluidity of the camera with the overall fluidity of the show itself, which becomes yet another marker of quality:

...the steadicam is in constant motion as the cast stride through a labyrinthine set towards the plush but lonely oval of the Executive Office itself (Billen 46).

...hyperactively busy, with a dozen major characters zipping through the White House corridors, jumping from conversation to conversation, story to story, sometimes in a single unbroken steadicam shot. These characters thrive on adrenaline; the show wants you to feel the rush ("An Endorsement...").

Energetic phrasing like "constant motion" and "hyperactively busy" are linked in the comments above with the steadicam as a technological aid to visual flow, adding another link in a growing chain of associations between the "look" of the series and the variety of ways the series can be understood as quality television.

But here, too, there is a hint of reproach, as if viewers ought to feel sheepish for being drawn in by the hi-tech theatrics: "The show wants you to feel the rush," drawing the reader's attention to, of all things, the rhetoric of the image. This passage argues for an awareness on the part of the reader/viewer that *The West Wing* has an agenda, one in which excitement over witnessing (participating in?) the inner workings of government can be incorporated into a pattern of television viewing. This pattern works to increase a sense of exclusivity among quality viewers (one cannot forget they are the affluent viewers producers value). By drawing attention to this conceit, the author resists the "enticements" of the show to some degree.

By articulating the series as a desiring subject that “wants” you to feel something, the author approaches the text rhetorically. We could surely argue about whether it is ultimately appropriate for these journalists to insist on such anthropomorphizing, but the greater import of this tactic is its presence within an otherwise journalistic frame. For the critic above, it is important to step back from a full-fledged embrace of the program in order to recognize the ways it interpellates viewers. The image hails us, asking us to identify with its structures of meaning, and through this process of identification, take on the attitudes and values it promotes. But we should resist that call, lest we become inadvertently implicated too deeply in that identity. This critic draws the reader’s attention to the underlying constitutive rhetoric upon which *The West Wing*’s representations are built, inviting the reader to resist the interpellating moment through detachment and disengagement.

Widescreen

Perhaps the most openly negative response to a specific material practice of the show among journalists has been to the decision to switch to widescreen. This decision has been understood by many journalists as yet another cinematic tie-in, but in this case—as opposed to the use of the film camera or steadicam—the association works against *The West Wing*:

Some viewers are irked by the cinematic letterboxing of the show...
(Rosenthal 55).

If you don't like the widescreen look of "ER," you won't be happy to hear this news. Come fall, "The West Wing" will be shown in widescreen, too, with black bars across the top and bottom of the screen to give the show a more cinematic feel (“NBC Shows...” D6).

Such journalists may be reacting to the fact that letterboxed shows cover less of the available screen space than fullscreen ones do, making everything slightly smaller on the same set. For homes with small television sets, this has become a meddlesome problem for some

viewers. Notably absent from most commentary about this issue is any indication that the purported benefit of letterboxing—to see that portion of a widescreen image that would otherwise be cut off in fullscreen—is something viewers (including critics) find an acceptable trade-off for the smaller overall dimensions of objects in the image.

This is an important element to linger upon, because it draws attention to the *ad hoc* nature of many of the attributes of “quality” (whether as genre, brand, or some other categorizing move). Because terms like “quality” are open to rhetorical strategies of identification, discrete material elements like a mobile camera or letterboxing can be articulated with those conceptual categories with which audiences choose to identify. Among journalists, the mobile camera has been accepted as a positive value for television, while widescreen seems less welcome. While the representations of the show itself argue for a community of producers interested in doing as much as possible to identify the show with the admittedly nebulous notion of “quality television,” when the text circulates culturally, journalists constitute one community of viewers who continue to reshape what “quality” itself means or can mean, accepting certain articulations at the same time that they resist others.

Writing

All of these elements of the visual text circulate among consumers of *The West Wing* in the ways I have described. They are significant among journalists in that they form a cluster to which critics return repeatedly as they engage with the question of quality television in the test case of *The West Wing*. However, whereas producers remain somewhat silent about the ways the writing of the series operates, journalists return to the writing of *The*

West Wing at least as often as they do to its visual elements, and often with equal vehemence.¹⁰⁰

The differences between series' like *The West Wing* that match Thompson's criterion of "writer-based" television and the writing of other television series has been brought into relief by the explosion of reality television.¹⁰¹ There has been a recent proliferation of shows such as *Survivor*, *Fear Factor*, and *The Amazing Race*, which differ from traditionally scripted dramas in their relative lack of set script, as well as their cheap production cost. These shows tend to be heavier on plot and/or action, and are enticing for their cinéma-vérité realism and shock value more than nuance or character development. By contrast, hour-long dramas and sitcoms both highlight this aspect of their structure through a much heavier use of dialogue. With sitcoms, this is where we see the set-ups and jokes that are the genre's stock-in-trade. In hour-long dramas like *The West Wing*, dialogue is the primary element of a narrative in which we learn something new about the characters. As such, an abundant use of dialogue becomes identified with a sense of depth, for which a "quality" television program can be praised. In opposition to reality television, *The West Wing* becomes associated with quality through its extensive use of words.

¹⁰⁰ Producers do occasionally draw readers' attention to it in their published interviews: "I really like writing dialogue....I can sit at home and...write a hundred pages of crackling dialogue....For me, dialogue is the fun part, and the plot is intrusive" (Sorkin); "Aaron loves to paint himself as a bad boy, but there's always a script and it's always good" (Wells). By "good," Wells' comment above means "long scenes and marathon speeches." By "crackling," Sorkin seems to refer to dialogue that is delivered quickly and in short bursts, with multiple layers of subtext and intertextual references. Such an emphasis on dialogue as one of the key vehicles of the text's content can be reasonably understood as once again intended to signal educated audiences, especially since some viewers are specifically turned off by such speedy talking.

¹⁰¹ What does it mean to be "writer-based" when talking about television? There are perhaps a number of ways to address this question, but the most direct is simply to say that writer-based shows, as Thompson has suggested, highlight what has been written, as opposed to what has happened. Briefly, this suggests that the focus is on the literary crafting of a singular work—in the case of television, each individual episode—and the ideas, figures, and themes discussed and elaborated upon within it. Such a hermeneutic is opposed to a focus on the strict content of an episode, in which elements of the show's text directs the viewer attention away from the structure of the words themselves and toward some other element: the visual spectacle, the style of imagery, etc. See also Caldwell, who provides an in-depth discussion of the ways content and form become intertwined in television.

In fact, most reviewers of *The West Wing* would not hesitate to consider the series “intelligent” or “sophisticated” because of the way it implements a dialogueic pattern that encourages viewers to read the characters as knowledgeable and witty:

There are good performances, crispy-crunchy lines of dialogue and a few sizzly sparks (Shales C1).

...the dialogue has the comic panache of *Ally McBeal* (Billen 46).

...unusually strong dialogue (Leo 56).

For all the crackling dialogue that is Sorkin's trademark, and for all the hallway hurly-burly the show's directors concoct for each episode, the overall tone of the series is stately and earnest (Aucoin C1).

...a television program with such crisp and insightful writing... (Weiler, qtd. in “Did Political Platform...” 11A).

What these lines bring out is the relationship between *The West Wing*'s status as different (“unusually strong,” “such crisp and insightful writing”) and an almost kinetic expression of the viewer's experience in watching the show (“sizzly”, “crispy-crunchy,” and “crackling”). Indeed, the show is interpreted in this context as energetic despite its mostly writer-based structure and tone. Instead of appearing boring to these critics, the show is “stately and earnest” while still retaining “comic panache.” Arguably, this is bolstered or even produced because of the way the show uses mobile cameras, in that some of the energy lost in long, expository passages of dialogue necessary for understanding the plot can be recovered through the ubiquitous “peda conferencing” through office hallways.

This energy extends beyond the script to its delivery as well. For journalists, the show is well-written, not just in the sense that the dialogue itself is clever, but also in the way the actors deliver it, and that it is tightly edited for pacing. In this case, that means *fast*:

...rat-a-tat writing... (Keveney).

...witty, hypercaffeinated office jabber with an intensity that's easier to buy from folks who have the Bomb than from sportscasters" [referring to Sorkin's first show, *Sports Night*] ("Capital Ideas" 96).

...dialogue, usually delivered frenetically while the characters careen down corridors, has become Sorkin's signature (Storey E1).

...dialogue is furiously fast and witty... (Elber).

...the characters in his ABC series "Sports Night" and his new NBC series "The West Wing" speak in a kind of frothing-at-the-mouth frenzy, as if they've just popped one too many puppy uppers (Williams, W. 6).

This flood of energetic adjectives and adverbs ("rat-a-tat," hypercaffeinated," "frenetically," "furiously fast," "frothing-at-the-mouth frenzy") represents further evidence of each critic's assertion that the heavy use of dialogue, one of the conventionally recognized attributes of quality television, is recognizably at play within the boundaries of each episode.

And yet, again, whether this aspect of the show can make the argument for quality for all journalists is less firm. At least one reviewer argued the writing was so fast it turned away some viewers: "Many viewers can't quite follow what the hell Martin Sheen and company are blathering on about" (Havrilesky). As with other aspects of the program's formal style, there are subtle but clear lines of fracture within the community of television journalists concerning whether and to what extent *The West Wing* should be allowed to stand as the exemplar of television's possibilities. Journalists' cynical awareness of the very same producers' motivations considered above holds them back from a full embrace of the series. Because television has been considered a public medium since its earliest days, there is already some interpenetration between journalists' concern for the medium and their roles as citizens. The extent to which they serve a public role as the "fourth estate" necessitates, for

some journalists, attention to the ways each series they critique stands up to the idealized notions of not only what television can be, but what it should be.

A review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* elaborates on this point:

This is also important for *West Wing*'s status as "intelligent" television.... And in addition to bucking the odds with a politicized show, Sorkin has for years tempted fate with another TV no-no: being too smart. It's true. The American audience does not like to feel stupid, doesn't like to be talked down to or lectured or made to feel in any way inadequate. When viewers want smarts, they go to PBS. On network television, they demand first to be entertained. If you can do that intelligently, great. But going Ivy League only annoys people. Sorkin is at his worst when he takes his characters -- already cut considerable critical slack for all talking the same way -- and puts them on soap boxes (Goodman D1).

Though this passage's overall tone is cynical, the idealism driving it seeps through when it describes cutting the show "considerable critical slack for all talking the same way": though ideally we should expect great things from our television shows, including characters with different backgrounds who speak differently, *The West Wing* and others like *The Sopranos* and *Law and Order* are what we have. We must resign ourselves to their limitations. Thus, one important way journalists can be understood to be enacting their roles as fan citizens is as correlational watchdogs. That is, they serve a public function to assess the degree to which our aesthetic texts and our political texts correlate with one another. Does our television claim political status when it ought not? Do our politicians perform in public more like actors than statesmen and women? Based on the public responses of these journalists to *The West Wing*, these questions seem to be important implicit concerns for them.

Additionally, however, there is also a cynical undercurrent to this reviewer's characterization of the problem. "It's true," "feel *in any way* inadequate," and "going Ivy League only annoys people" each indicate an invitation to recognize but also demean the desires of "the American audience." Thus, for these journalists, the dialogue on *The West*

Wing is a sign of both strength and potential weakness: on one hand it reveals both an interest and ability to express intellectual and emotional depth, and on the other hand a degree of excess in its sheer verbosity. Journalistic cynicism about the nature of television intermingles with their cynicism about contemporary U.S. politics. Understanding the anxieties their writing implies regarding television as a medium becomes important in understanding why the community of journalists move in a politically cynical orbit.

“Reel Life”: Interrogating “The West Wing” and Politics

The West Wing is offered up as a shining star of quality by some journalists, but others wish to claim it as “sentimental” or “mushy”; to some, “whip-smart writing” (Deggans 2B), but to others “show-stopping speeches so cheesy you could serve them with crackers and fruit” (“An Endorsement...”). Of course, simple disagreement need not imply a rift within the community itself, and the number of voices from among journalists that decry the series’ lack of quality is a minority. However, this dispute is not one that was settled years ago or one that is maintained by a few zealots in a dark corner of the journalistic community. As *The West Wing* has continued, specific episodes, plots, and character development (as well as uncanny similarities with current events) have reopened the question again and again. Journalists ultimately link the question of whether the series should become an exemplar of quality television with questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.

For example, the *New York Times* argues for a reading of the show as a “collision of styles” that “consistently undermines its own ambition”:

With its acerbic sense of politics and its Mighty Mouse hero of a president, the show is "Wag the Dog" meets Frank Capra. That collision of styles has made it the smartest, most tantalizing, most maddening new drama in a season full of them. And the series's [sic] split personality points to an issue about television's possibilities and limitations. A solid though not a spectacular ratings success, artistically "The West Wing" towers over the junkier dramas

that litter the television landscape, including several that began the season with promise. Yet it consistently undermines its own ambition, as if it doesn't dare trust the audience to grapple with realism and ambiguity" (James E1).

This framing of the issue offers relative praise for the series in that it "towers over the junkier dramas," placing it above them metaphorically. But the series still cannot reach the true heights of television drama because "it doesn't dare trust the audience to grapple with realism and ambiguity." Here again, a critic anthropomorphizes the show as a means to explain the process of identification viewers can feel working on them through consumption of the series. In expecting the worst from the television they criticize, journalists argue for what they see as base causes for current conditions in television. While they are comfortable critiquing the status quo, it is with an entrenched resignation, as if to say "here is what is going on, but nothing can be done about it."

Journalists have thus helped to produce a context for critical reception of *The West Wing* in which an idealism about its potential to raise the bar for television as a medium continues to clash with a cynicism about whether that idea is even possible in our contemporary mediated environment. Echoing the claims of social critics like Chaloupka, Goldfarb, and Putnam, many *West Wing* journalists constantly resist bestowing their highest accolades when writing about the series. A significant part of this holding back has to do with the way the text of *The West Wing*, in conjunction with the public texts of its producers, has consistently articulated its status as "quality television" with a specific form of political realism.

As we have seen, in the public discourse in which the series is implicated, "quality" is wrapped up with "realism." For journalists, this arguably induces even greater anxiety than the question of the program's status as the "best television has to offer." Journalistic

cynicism about the possibilities for television as an art form is perhaps only exceeded by its cynicism about contemporary U.S. politics. Because *The West Wing* is about that very subject, journalists write about politics when they write about the series. As such, they enact their roles as fan citizens: they seek to incorporate their understanding of popular culture with their understanding of politics in a way that can reconcile these two spheres of public life and makes sense in their daily lives. Journalists employ a variety of specific strategies to help balance those two spheres, as we will see. In the conclusion to this chapter I consider the efficacy of such strategies for both the community of journalists and the broader culture in which their writing circulates. But first, I address the context in which these deeper questions about the relationship between television and politics arose.

Just as “reality” television was beginning its arrival *en masse*,¹⁰² many viewers began expressing anxiety over the degree to which *The West Wing* ought to pursue its own version of realism, and at what costs, while others valorized such attempts as a hallmark of what could be good about television. Most often their reasons for such claims have had to do with a sense that *The West Wing*, as a show that represents contemporary U.S. politics, is implicated in a public discourse about politics (along with print and television news journalists and politicians themselves). Perhaps even more readily than with questions of quality, journalists find the very presence of *The West Wing* a reason to express weariness, cynicism, and sometimes disdain about the state of U.S. politics. Unlike the posts of newsgroup participants we will consider in Chapter 4, journalistic discourse has tended to question the benefit of a fictional representation of presidential life. The discourse has cast

¹⁰² 1999 saw the eighth season of *The Real World*, seventh season of *Road Rules*, and *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, with *Survivor* and *Big Brother* appearing later that summer. *The Weakest Link* aired in 2001 along with *Fear Factor*, and *The Bachelor* and *American Idol* aired in 2002.

discussion of any possible role for television in the political process as either severely limited or entirely negative.

The journalistic community appears mostly concerned with the ways *The West Wing* uncomfortably crosses, shifts, or blurs an imaginary boundary between fact and fiction. This boundary is vigorously defended by producers, but as we are about to learn, journalistic discourse articulates the boundary as no less fundamental: “The boundary between reality and fiction has now been blurred to such an extent by show business, the news business and government alike that almost no shows produced by any of them are instantly accepted as truth” (Rich). In fact, most of the aspects of the visual economy described in the previous section, instead of solidifying assent to *The West Wing*’s ability to capture or otherwise represent reality, appear to heighten journalists’ anxieties over the ability of public institutions like the media and the government to maintain such a boundary.

Take as an example the rapid-fire dialogue that characterizes the show. Journalists indicate both that it represents an understanding of White House staff as intelligent and focused (i.e., an accurate reflection of reality), and that it belies an interest in causing viewers to understand staffers on the show as hyper-competent (more capable than staffers could be in real life). Other aspects of the visual economy prompt similar anxieties, all centered upon the question of whether it is appropriate to even attempt to maintain separate realms for representing fiction and fact.

Here is one place to pause and consider my claim that there is a potentially strong response to Putnam and Sunstein’s claims that isolation and fragmentation are devastating to social cohesion. In many of the critiques we have encountered thus far, the cynical tone arguably has one positive effect: it leaves open a space for idealism. Though often ringing

hollow in terms of its lack of proposals for active response, the cynical voice nonetheless draws clear and steady attention to its object of critique. A reader cannot miss a cynic's criticism, even if she ends up experiencing the despair the cynic encourages her to feel. One specific way this can be helpful in a public forum is as a corrective to the powerful ideological effects of the series' producers. We have seen the wide variety of economic, formal, and rhetorical practices producers use to encourage specific readings of their text. A cynic is not only clearly but conspicuously resisting those practices when she responds in print. Thus, the cynical voice *can* be productive in public life in spite of its tendency to encourage disengagement. However, there is a knife's edge between this kind of productive voice and complete detachment from the public sphere. I address this issue in more detail below.

Before we can fully assess the possibilities for this cynical voice in contemporary social life, however, we must consider the specific anxieties many journalists express *about The West Wing* in their writing. Below I consider three significant and related elements of journalistic discourse on *The West Wing*. First, I discuss a common technique, almost ubiquitous at some level among *West Wing* journalists, of leading each story with a clever play on words that immediately draws readers' attention to the fact/fiction division. Second, I elaborate on other linguistic strategies used by journalists—for whom words are their arsenal—to combat the blurring they fear. Finally, I draw out the underlying context upon which many journalists lay much of the blame for the acuteness of the blurring problem.

An Opening Gambit: Blurring The Boundary And Grabbing Readers

One consistent technique practiced by numerous journalists who write about *The West Wing* involves the article lead-in. Such writing can include television reviews, editorials, or political commentary, but what connects them is how the opening sentences in such pieces unfold without any clear reference to the story's status as fact or fiction. Almost invariably, such articles begin by weaving together factual and fictitious names and events in such a way that the reader is invited to consider, if only momentarily, the irony of the relationship between the fiction of *The West Wing* and our own political reality.¹⁰³

Stylistically, such usage functions as a ploy that grabs the readers' attention. A number of articles begin with a straightforward, news-like description of a situation whose characters appear to be government officials embroiled in a political debate.¹⁰⁴ The reader soon learns, however, that some of the characters are fictional and the narrative is *The West Wing*. This gambit, which works ironically to draw attention to the distinction between fiction and fact, draws upon pre-conceived assumptions about politics as "real" and television as "fake" in order to induce surprise when the reader learns she has been reading about a fictional scenario. Consider the following opening line from a review of *The West Wing*:

Josiah Bartlet could've whipped George W. like the mumble-mouthed Yale frat boy he is. Too bad we picked Al "The Bore" Gore for the chore (Storey E1).

¹⁰³ Practically speaking, this is very unlikely to be the case. The articles do not simply appear out of thin air with no context to guide the reader. See below.

¹⁰⁴ For example: Saunders opens "This is the year of the president on television" (4); in Keveney, it is "Voters say character matters in their presidential choices, but you didn't have to wait until the New Hampshire primary or the Republican campaign in South Carolina to learn that. The Nielsen vote has been in for a while, and the winner is President Josiah Bartlet, the kinder, gentler commander-in-chief portrayed in NBC's "The West Wing"; Gray begins "I hope this won't end in my knitting a scarf for Barbara Walters, but I think I have a little crush on the president of the United States." This is but a small sampling of the variety of lead-ins one may find among articles about *The West Wing*. It is a remarkably persistent phenomenon, especially among reviews and articles written during the first three years of the series' run.

This lead-in represents the most common gambit among *West Wing* commentators: the suggestion—implicit in its lack of acknowledgement of any division between a real world and a fictional one—that the two worlds are interchangeable. Josiah Bartlet is as acceptable a candidate as Bill Bradley or Gary Bauer when it comes to finding a reasonable substitute for Al Gore. So much so, that Bartlet “could’ve” beaten Bush, not “might’ve” or even “should’ve.” This technique is one that encourages readers’ awareness of the similarities between fictional and factual political figures.

And yet, this particular gambit uses the ploy only to grab readers’ attention, lacking any attempt to sustain the ruse. The lead-in is quickly followed in this and almost every other case by the revelation that the reader has been the unwilling participant in a bait-and-switch:

That might be the opinion of millions of Democrat devotees who wish NBC's *The West Wing* were The Real Thing.

With the revelation (in just the second sentence) that the reader is not reading an article about the recent election but a television review of *The West Wing*, the article creates and sustains a separation, however fleeting and softened by its winking tone, between common-sense notions of a boundary between fiction and fact and a more playful recognition of its malleability.

This version of the gambit is telling in at least three respects. First, as I discuss in Chapter 4, humor and play serve an important function for online forum participants as one strategy for mitigating conflict and diffusing rising tensions among group members (as well as serving as a fertile ground for development of fellowship). Arguably, something similar is going on with journalists in their persistent use of this winking tone in their lead-ins. However, whereas playfulness is an integrated aspect of the nature of online forums as a

genre and mode of communication, it does not often find much purchase in the world of print journalism. This is partly due to the Joe-Friday-like seriousness encouraged by the culture of objectivity. Thus, the playfulness exhibited in the lines of so many *West Wing* review leads is more likely an offshoot of the same cynical tone we have already identified: without firm confidence in the possibility of change in the way politics is represented on television, one is left with little option but to laugh it off as a joke too futile to merit real earnestness.

Second, as an exemplary instance, it brings together an apparent idealism with honest reality. Specifically, it suggests we turn a highly admirable fictional character into a real human being and insert him into the world of real politics.¹⁰⁵ The effect of such a juxtaposition, as already indicated, is to make it harder for readers to maintain any clear distinction between fiction and reality. A viewer is less able to separate the two easily in her mind when an article—and, significantly, not just one or a few but many, even most of them—moves outside the typical boundaries of objective reporting or even personal opinion and enters the realm of pseudo-fiction.¹⁰⁶

As the above example illustrates, these professional journalists (and *West Wing* viewers) use the fictional opening gambit to indicate something about the nature of political life, both real and represented. In these opening lines, brief though they are, there is an indication that the black-and-white boundary between fiction and reality not only *can* be blurred, but *ought* to be. For what reasons or to what ends such a blurring should take place is less clear. In this example, the “millions of Democrat devotees” have been out there

¹⁰⁵ While Bartlet’s failure to disclose his Multiple Sclerosis would probably not be considered “highly admirable,” this plot development had not occurred at the time of this journalist’s gambit. Additionally, the key element is not Bartlet’s admirable character traits but the willingness on the part of the reader to make direct comparisons between the fictional character and actual politicians.

¹⁰⁶ It is important to note that critic’s reviews, as a subset of all the articles I consider here, do not tend to adhere as vehemently to journalistic objectivity. Thus, this point is less accurate when speaking specifically of them. However, the gambit may be found in other kinds of articles about the series.

“wishing” for a miracle: that they might wake up from a nightmare to find Bartlet an actual candidate for whom their vote could be meaningful. The intensity of the tone here pushes beyond political fervor, a sarcastic, cynical holding of the issue at arm’s length.

There is a third element in this particular example that is noteworthy and may offer a different perspective on this question. Notice that the text separates the world of *The West Wing* from the flesh-and-blood world grammatically: the flesh-and-blood world is “The Real Thing,” using capitalization to re-define the boundaries it just blurred in the previous sentence. A formula begins to take shape: Step 1—open the admittedly tenuous rift between those things we can safely call “fiction” and “reality”; Step 2—quickly repair it verbally so the scar is still visible but the boundary is once again firm. The nature of opening such issues, even when quickly closed, is not to eliminate them but instead to allow them to fester. In concretizing the two categories in this way, the text effectively oscillates between two versions of the story, one in favor of play and boundary blurring, the other promoting clear-cut lines of demarcation.

Why might this be? What value can there be for viewers to actively seek out ways to draw attention to the boundary and its malleability—especially, in this case, viewers who more frequently operate under the standards of professional journalism that would disdain such playful tactics? Such oscillation is a hint that real anxiety exists for some viewers about the relationship between reality and fiction, and how these terms ought to be spun out on a playing field of shared values, especially when it comes to the “architectonic science” of politics. In their roles as fan citizens, many journalists take the opportunity to respond publicly to these anxieties and share them. Though they may officially adhere to more strict guidelines of conduct imposed by the institutions that employ them, there is a sense of

“getting away with something” in these lead-ins. In the wake of the juncture between raising the question and repealing it, readers are left to ponder the similarities and differences between the characters on their televisions and the politicians in their statehouses.

To further complicate matters, the material practice of reading such articles tells a somewhat different tale. Because of the traditions of journalism, entirely accustomed as they are to the practice of the headline, it is rare to encounter a lead-in of this type amidst a stream of prose otherwise unrelated to *The West Wing* or television in general. For example, many readers will readily admit to an even more specific practice when reading a newspaper: perusing headlines first as a means of sorting out and prioritizing one’s reading of the news. Under this rubric, we encounter the headline *before* we ever encounter the lead-in at all. In the previous example, the headline is, “Capitalizing on Clintonism -- Emmy-winning *The West Wing* gives its followers a place, perchance to dream.” Thus, the text arrives for reading most often in a pre-coded order, as a film or television show does, not in the abstract, but in practice.¹⁰⁷ The potential benefits of a strategy like this become even more muted, if we maintain that one significant benefit is to raise the question of the fiction/fact boundary for readers. Sandwiched between the headline and the inevitable repairing of the rift opened in the lead-in, the entire gambit should be seen as a relatively oblique reference to the boundary. Journalists would like to give us something to chew on, but the implicit rules of their community and practices of their readers keep them from offering much in the way of sustenance in practice.

¹⁰⁷ This contrasts with what some theorists (for example, Bolter and Grusin, 54-62) have suggested about print, that because we have the ability to begin our encounter with the text at any point within it, it offers a more democratizing reading experience than motion picture media, which require us begin at the beginning and move to the end. Putting aside arguments about our ability to make similar movements in the age of the VCR, though, it is still important to consider common practice, and on this score reading print is far more often than not structured in order to guide the reader in a pre-determined way that is far more similar to motion picture organization than these theorists would be apparently willing to admit.

Making Connections: Other Strategies for Policing the Boundary

There are other, more insistent versions of this play between reality and fiction in journalistic writing. They are connected to a distinction drawn between how viewers want their president and staff to *look* to them on television, real or fictional, and how they want them *to be in reality*. Whether or not most Americans are likely to think of politics as flashy showmanship without substance—outside of academic circles, realism is alive and well¹⁰⁸—journalists are drawn to the distinction between what goes on in the real White House and what happens on an NBC sound stage. A subtle strand of this discourse suggests that representations of fictional characters elicit more truth about their nature than representations of real people do of theirs. Take the following excerpt, which seems to see no distinction at all between television characters and politicians:

Surf though the channels when the premiere of "The West Wing" airs, and you won't know whether you're watching entertainment or politics. So finally, the line between entertainment and politics has been smudged beyond definition. All the real drama of American public life - the real fighting over issues, the real struggle for power, the real battle over ideas - now looks like television fiction, and television fiction now looks like American politics. They're indistinguishable....NBC has pointed out to those Washingtonians not important enough to be stuck at the White House after 9 p.m. (or pontificating on the events of the day on cable TV) that what they do for a living now is plain old entertainment (Shribman A3).

Here the spectator “won’t know” the difference between television and politics, so closely are they linked aesthetically, socially, and culturally. Shribman draws a stark distinction between “what [Washingtonians] do for a living” and “plain old entertainment,” but argues that the former has become the latter. But the key here is not the argument for their commensurability, for surely even such a straightforward claim’s vector of intent is toward sarcasm. Instead, the key is that the former category has *become* the latter, and that change is

¹⁰⁸ Paraphrase of a comment made by John Lucaites, April 2000.

bad for politics. We are aware that “it is quite easy (and often popular) to view both politicians and the entertainment industry with cynical disdain” (Jones 7). This awareness may cause us to read Shribman’s argument as a dismissible rant. But what is lost in that reading is the reason why cynical posturing on the topic of entertainment and politics has become so passé: the notion that politics *should* aspire to something more, while entertainment need not.

In their Fourth Estate position as the “voice” of the people, journalists may see themselves as carrying a heavy burden: to witness the worst of contemporary culture and report on it without having the final power to do anything about the things they find repellent. The pressures of deadlines and professional ethics effectively cut them off from the kind of deliberation and feedback a conversation between friends so often supplies. Alone in their respective offices—often the only member of a staff who actually writes on television—they become too easily cut off from the larger community of journalists dealing with the same questions. When you add on top of that the demands of the profit motive, as well as competition with journalists at other papers and the need/desire to play a game of one-up-man’s-ship, there are finally few social resources journalists can apply to political problems that build up in their daily lives. These problems seep out in their prose.

Taken together, these attempts to deal with the blurring of fiction and fact help make meaning for the show by articulating journalistic anxieties about depictions of reality to ethical questions about how we would like our politicians to act. Our representative democracy’s effective operation rests on the ability of the individuals we choose to represent us to act properly in our absence. If we have trouble distinguishing between a real president and a fictional one, we may find ourselves both unnerved by an inability to apply separate

sets of values while simultaneously empowered to use representations of politicians as examples for the real ones. *The West Wing* has thus become situated culturally between ontological questions of the constitution of reality and ethical questions of idealism. While these questions readily turn sour and cynical among journalists, elsewhere (as in newsgroup forums) they serve as a discourse for an extended debate over what form civic culture should take. The context for such cynicism has been articulated by journalists themselves as “fatigue” over the highly publicized and protracted series of scandals during the Clinton administration.

“*Clinton Fatigue*”¹⁰⁹

An “ideal” representation of the presidency, tied inextricably to questions about President Clinton’s moral indiscretions, draws upon the differences between depictions of him and his staff to which the American public became accustomed on TV news, and the representations of Josiah Bartlet and his staff each week on *The West Wing*. The ensuing public conversation is perhaps most directly linked to the specific historical context within which *The West Wing* has appeared, i.e., the post-Clinton presidency. As much as former President Clinton has been used by any number of sources (but especially the conservative Right) as an emblem for what is wrong with contemporary morality, journalists appeared unwilling to miss the opportunity to continue to draw the comparison between Bill Clinton and Josiah Bartlet:

The image of the White House staff as a cozy workplace family constitutes escapism. For this critic, that's bothersome. For viewers tired of real politics, that's obviously an allure. Some of them are probably the same people who tell pollsters a presidential candidate's character is most important to them. "The West Wing" offers evidence that political cynicism isn't universal, that some viewers still embrace ideals about government. But they're not naive,

¹⁰⁹ From Laurence (E8).

either. The brilliant, noble beacon many long for may not end up as president, but at least he can play one on TV (Keveney).

Notable here is the already “bothersome” nature of the show, which frames the comments that follow. When viewers grow “tired of real politics,” they can “escape” them by turning on *The West Wing*, and in doing so can show that “political cynicism isn’t universal.”

Here is a similarly themed passage:

...I think I have a little crush on the [P]resident of the United States. Not the real one, of course....Bartlet's the kind of president we all used to believe in back when being president was still considered honest work....It's one of those quixotic quests that nobody in their right mind really believes is the business of government...but it's true to the spirit of "The West Wing," a fairy tale set in a White House some of us wish we still believed in (Gray).

The interplay between idealistic fervor and cynical deflation in both of these passages is notable. In the former the stance is clearly one of pessimism for the show’s “escapism,” while in the latter the characterization of Bartlet is optimistic enough for Gray to have “a little crush” on him. But still, by accepting the terms of idealism *The West Wing* promotes, it only brings into sharper relief the cynical attitude toward politics. To consider the presidency a position that entails “honest work” is not just foolish or antiquated, its “quixotic.” *The West Wing* has to be a “fairy tale,” and not even one we wish for, but one “we wish we still believed in.” All of this is deeply embittered stuff. The burden of being asked to compare Bartlet and Clinton is simply too much for some journalists.

To further complicate the ways journalists think of *The West Wing* as an ideal, some have noted a relationship between Martin Sheen and his character on the show, drawing attention to Sheen’s personal political activity off the set and often making fine distinctions between Bartlett’s political views as indicated by his actions and Sheen’s own personal

views: “The show is developing such true believers that Martin Sheen—a noted liberal—is said to be worried that people will confuse the show's middle-of-the-road president (in Sheen's view) with him” (Goodman). Viewers wish to understand any and all motivations of Bartlet as a character through both the “liberal-leaning” politics evident in Sorkin’s writing and the overtly liberal personal views of Sheen himself. The sense that a television show can depict an ideal liberal President after a less-than-ideal liberal administration is palpable in much of the writing about *The West Wing*’s success, but it is connected to a deep cynicism over the proper actions of the President himself.

Weariness—“fatigue”—over President Clinton’s moral and ethical battles become entwined with the way journalists write about *The West Wing*. Former White House press secretary and *West Wing* consultant Dee Dee Myers calls it “the Clinton we wish could've been” (Waxman C1). Headlines from newspapers such as the *Boston Herald* and the *St. Petersburg Times* belie a wariness to discuss the inner workings of the Clinton presidency anymore: “TV President seems far better than the real one” and “‘West Wing' explores White House life; But not the Clinton White House. Honest.” Sorkin himself took pains to make clear one primary goal he had in creating the show: “There is no question that the events in the Clinton White House have been dismaying to say the least, so I hope that after this downgrading of the government our show can provide a certain amount of wish fulfillment...This is the White House portrayed in the way we want it to be” (Williams, W. 6). In an article entitled, “Good Timing Helps Make ‘The West Wing’ a Hit,” one journalist notes:

In the post-Nixon days, the country was reeling from its first popular opinion nightmare that citizens could no longer trust the government. Now, as we near the post-Clinton days, our disappointment long having turned to unsentimental jadedness, how many among us could stand up and say that politics is noble,

that politicians are representatives of the people and that clashing political ideologies are set aside for the common good? (Goodman D1).

These journalists seem to suggest the mental and emotional drain many viewers of *The West Wing* had experienced prior to the show's appearance produced a kind of deep longing for a representation of the presidency they could once again feel good about.

Good timing is always a factor in any show's success, because the specific historical context within which a show appears necessarily inflects the way the show is received and consumed. *The West Wing* has been no different in this regard, articulating a sense of fantasy regarding the American presidency that allows the series to figure prominently in a public desire to look to the future, beyond the foibles of former President Clinton (and now perhaps President Bush) to the future of the White House:

"The West Wing" isn't the recognizable past or present. So perhaps it's the ghost of Christmas future. Is it foreshadowing President Gore or President Bradley? President Bush or President McCain? Whatever the case, one of them will have quite a presidency to live up to now that Josiah Bartlett's purity has been on display (Rosenberg F1).¹¹⁰

A great deal of popular critical discourse suggests *The West Wing* has become something more than an escapist fantasy. The preceding analysis suggests that for journalists, it straddles whatever blurry boundary they wish to maintain between reality and fiction by representing a *model* of the West Wing: a *version* of reality to which viewers long for their leaders to aspire. On the other hand, the show's affinity to actual contemporary American politics also appears to incite a deep cynicism about the possibility of achieving in actuality what the show's producers have (relatively) easily crafted within the frame of each episode.

¹¹⁰This is ironic in light of the turn Bartlett's character took in revealing years of hiding his MS. (This was a significant episode arc in season 2, and the focus of the episode "17 People." It became an important part of the back story in subsequent seasons as well). However, that story arc has taken the same kind of turn as many others on the series: it has allowed a variety of facets of the issue to be deliberated and debated by numerous characters on the show, from passing comments to heated emotional displays. *The West Wing* seems to argue that even a cover-up is not one-sided, and good citizens will debate its merits.

There is little agreement and significant trepidation about the relationship between reality and fiction among *West Wing* journalists and critics. These underlying arguments and anxieties are most pronounced when they intersect with the discourse of politics. However, these are some of the worst kinds of anxieties in that they are essentially worries about others' actions (or at least, perceptions). Fears about the boundary between reality and fantasy rest on fears about how others will perceive that boundary (the social construction of that boundary, how they will act with reference to it, and what effect more nuanced, subtle, or complex interpretations of it will have on political outcomes). If we desire to understand the world as easily parsed into "real" and "fiction," it is because we are ultimately enthralled by the kind of world described by Habermas in discussing the public sphere: a purified world, a clean one, in which mess can be excoriated under the cleansing power of the light of reason.¹¹¹ Instead, what journalists often give us is a detached, disengaged, cynical representation of the world without clear direction. Through their longing for a purified, reasoned public sphere, journalists become incapable of prompting through their writing anything like the idealism their reviews of *The West Wing* sometimes exhibit. What the community of journalists brings to the public debate through their critique regarding the relationship between popular culture and politics is often folded back into a more standardized institutional framework because of its location within the professional conventions of journalism and its pervasive cynical tone. And yet, cynicism can potentially serve as one political voice among many, adding a new critical perspective. But its practitioners must continue to find motivation to keep returning to the conversation, to resist the temptation cynicism inevitably presents to disengage completely from public life.

¹¹¹He explicitly refers to the public sphere as "purified" in a discussion of the roots of the notion of a "public sphere" in 18th Century France (95).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the ways a second group of *West Wing* viewers express their readings of the show. As professionals whose craft is rooted in a tradition of word-smiths, print journalists consume the show from within a particular context. The institution of journalism in the United States is one deeply rooted in a commitment to maintaining objective distance from their subject. As such, the popular press embodies a quintessential modernism: a group of individuals whose socially-mandated role is to stand back from the messiness of life in order to provide the people with a chastened, sterile commentary on it. Contemporary U.S. journalistic discourse, as exemplified in the passages I have analyzed above, encourages an ironic, impersonal logic of critique.

However, there is another, more insipid strand of critique in play among journalists who write about *The West Wing*, manifest in a pervasive cynicism. Here, journalists presume the worst of their subjects, whether they be the producers and actors on the show, the ex-administration consultants who assist them, or politicians themselves. It appears someone has to be the scapegoat for their objective critique to have any bite. If *The West Wing* is a quality show, it could be better. If it is not, it debases its audience. It also debases us whether it mimics actual politics or provides an escapist fantasy. The benefits of a culture of cynicism have always been that the people become more aware of the real social and political costs of any policy. But there are some important aspects of social life that are lost when such an environment becomes predominant rather than simply complementary. Chaloupka, for example, claims journalists are our archetypal cynics (101). For him, cynicism precedes a lack of participation, something upon which democracy ultimately relies. Jeffrey Goldfarb bemoans the way “cynicism promotes the acceptance of the existing order of things,”

encouraging a detachment and disengagement with politics that hardens possibilities for change (30).

Thus, though an analysis of the community of journalists offers us one perspective on what it might mean to be a fan citizen, that perspective is limited in some important ways. The intensity of professional journalists' critique of the series highlights the ways "quality" and "realism" have become points of attack for a community shot through with an abiding cynicism about both television and politics. In their roles as professional critics, journalists respond to the series with both praise and disdain. That for many of these writers the series almost reaches an imagined pinnacle for television, but falls short, may be worse than if it never even approached such heights. Their reactions are further complicated by a sense that their citizenship is being tested by *The West Wing*: that the series invites them to remain optimists in a world overrun by cynics. Together, these journalistic aspects present fan citizenship as a kind of dilemma, torn between the realities of the actual world and a longing for something better.

However, this is not the only way fan citizenship has been formulated among *West Wing* viewers. As a bridge to the next chapter, I wish to conclude with a brief discussion of one more instance of journalistic cynicism. In briefly elaborating on this somewhat unique instance, I hope to bring together the significant issues of this chapter and begin to raise some of the key questions for the next.

First, it is important to acknowledge that this article by Chris Lehman, published in the March 2001 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly* during *The West Wing*'s second season, makes a strong and protracted argument against *any* aesthetic or political benefit for the show. It is thus a minority voice for its time, though it bears much affinity with the cynical

critiques I have highlighted above. The full text of the article is far too long to reprint here, but it consistently attacks the series for failing to rise above what it repeatedly claims is shallow or hollow political discourse while packaging it for mass consumption. In drawing on excerpts here, I run the risk of not fully articulating the subtleties of Lehmann's argument. However, I am not so much concerned with his argument as such as I am with the interaction with readers it engendered. Still, some sense of the general tenor of his argument will be helpful. For example:

...the mere persistence—indeed the continued, mammoth popularity—of the show signals a curious sort of social contract...the selective (yet ever didactic) liberal retreat into political fantasy.
...[the show] appeals to liberal viewers as an exercise in wish-fulfillment fantasy, pointing a way out of their post-Clinton predicament.
...the show eagerly displays its own stirringly “human” themes on its sleeve.
...the formulas that Sorkin favors...make Bartlet a two-dimensional glyph of implausible virtue.
...the way the show strives to dramatize the earnest inner torments [of its characters] produces a civic emptiness far hollower than that resounding through either of our major parties.
The West Wing...renders policymaking indistinguishable from the conduct of an encounter group.
The logic of these morally obtuse but deeply sentimental preenings of high-office holders is disturbing on many levels.
We need some satire, and fast (Lehmann 93-97).

As these excerpts make clear, this article addresses the relationship between *The West Wing* and contemporary politics, and concludes the program is valuable neither for its entertainment nor political aspects.¹¹² Driving the last cynical nail into its coffin, the piece suggests viewers who actually enjoy this bit of “dreck” are being duped, conned out of their leisure hours every Wednesday night.

¹¹² As an aside, it is much longer than the typical critical review of a television show. Articles on the arts tend to be longer in the *Atlantic Monthly* than in newspapers (and even other magazines), and in fact television rarely merits any comment at all in that publication. However, Lehmann's piece is over 3000 words, while a longish piece in a national newspaper might run 1000 to 1500 words.

And yet, there is something unifying about the condemnation of the show in this piece that makes it fundamentally similar to the other work I have considered above. As an exemplary instance of the cynical style, then, the piece brings together a wide variety of oppositions to the program's text. This article objects to *The West Wing* on so many levels, it can be understood as the quintessential condemnation of the series' inability to attain status as quality television.

However, the one significant difference between this and almost all other print journalism on *The West Wing* is that it has prompted a *direct response*. The *Atlantic Monthly* employs a practice of printing letters addressed to particular journalists regarding their articles. Once a handful of replies deemed worthy for print by editors have come in (which usually takes a few months, i.e., a few issues), the magazine offers the author the opportunity to respond to those responses, and the exchange is published. Several months after the magazine published the article above, such an exchange between the author and three readers highlighted both some obstacles associated with mass mediated texts and some potential solutions interactivity can provide.

While each of the three respondents offered critiques of Lehmann's piece, I want to focus briefly on one short comment made by Paul Brewer of Grand Rapids, Michigan: "Once again a conservative pundit tries to demonize liberalism and all liberals by any means necessary."¹¹³ Though this comment is part of the second response among the three and the only one to accuse Lehmann of being a conservative, Lehmann's first words of reply are: "I

¹¹³ The full text of Brewer's printed response is: "I am sincerely perplexed by how Chris Lehmann could possibly see the character Josiah Bartlett, in NBC's series *The West Wing*, as in any way defending the credibility of Bill Clinton as a President or as a person. Rather than creating a 'cult of personality' around Bill Clinton, *The West Wing*, week after week, shows viewers who Bill Clinton could have been but wasn't. Once again a conservative pundit tries to demonize liberalism and all liberals by any means necessary—even going as far as attempting to create a glaringly absurd false analogy in the form of a 'Bartlett is really Clinton' critique of a superb television series."

am not now, nor have I ever been, a conservative, let alone (shudder) a pundit. I would suggest that the nation's politics have come to a curious pass when the act of criticizing Bill Clinton or his televisual idealization condemns one to both these cruel fates."

The nature of this exchange is noteworthy for three reasons. First, unlike most other print journalists, the author has the opportunity to address what could be considered a simple misunderstanding: Lehmann did not intend his readers to interpret his piece as that of a "conservative pundit," and since at least one reader did, he takes the opportunity to set the record straight. However, there is another element to this exchange. Notice the way Lehmann is forced to add context and depth to his already in-depth article in response to this misunderstanding: he brings up his own political leanings, his sense of the contemporary political landscape, and implies his belief that Bartlet is Clinton's "televisual idealization." The simple fact of at least one reader response incongruent with his own intent prompts greater contextualization spurred by willingness to clarify.

Second, Lehmann elaborates on the necessity of such an article in terms of a liberal-democratic need to critique a former president. Conjuring one's *purpose* ("the act of criticizing Bill Clinton") is something journalists rarely have (or take) the opportunity to do. The need to respond to one's interlocutors brings out these richer aspects of any act of communication, and can at times overcome the powerful sedimentary effects of putting one's thoughts and ideas into print.

Finally, it is important to note the one comment from among the three responses that is a direct attack on Lehmann's personal character is the one to which he responds before any other. His tone is playful ("shudder") and conventional ("I am not, nor have I ever

been”¹¹⁴). In fact, these are elements of interpersonal discourse wholly similar to those one finds daily on the online forum of alt.tv.the-west-wing.

The addition of others’ voices into the stream of discourse is a powerful change in the structure of identification and argument for a community. As Lehmann’s response suggests, it is not as if journalists may not feel a need to respond, but that they typically have no public mechanism for acting upon that need in any way that could produce more compelling arguments. They are powerless to enact within their own community of professional journalists the kind of robust public community one finds online. Without the ability to participate in the kind of public forum in which others respond to one’s arguments, writers are more open to the kind of consuming cynicism we have seen journalists apply to the questions of quality and realism above. Even when that cynicism may be understood as productive, its sedimentary effects can become severely problematic. Without a responsive and vibrant community within which to situate such arguments, they can wither on the vine, turning sour and cynical before they can mature and ripen into effective tools for citizenship. Though they produce a far greater degree of multivocality than producers do, the cynicism enacted by journalists works at cross purposes to the development of the kind of fan citizenship the more robust environment of online communities provides.

Just because one participates in a forum does not mean one is immune from cynicism. But alt.tv.the-west-wing, an active online newsgroup of fans and citizens who readily intermingle both identities in their readings of the show, maintains a relatively unique public forum that seems to counteract some of the debilitating issues I have raised in this and the previous chapter. When the characteristics of such a forum are articulated with the

¹¹⁴This may also be playful, considering its similarity to Cold War accusations of communism.

historically specific characteristics of a television series that represents U.S. politics, something different and arguably unique happens. As we will see in Chapter 4, capitalist motives and cynicism are recognized and sometimes practiced on alt.tv.the-west-wing, but they are mitigated by the practices of community the group develops and understood within a context of aesthetic and political judgment that allows group members to articulate their individual experience with shared values.

Chapter 4

“The West Wing”’s Newsgroup Participants: A Community of Fans, a Community of Citizens

I suggested at the beginning of Chapter 1 that it is curious and perhaps counterintuitive for someone voluntarily to spend leisure time listening to and digesting the opinions of those with whom one disagrees. This assessment stems from a notion that in the contemporary bipartisan political environment, U.S. citizens are much more interested in what Putnam calls “bonding” communities than “bridging” communities: we prefer to participate in groups that reinforce our values rather than those that encourage exposure to new or different points of view (Putnam 22). David Brooks, a popular columnist for the *New York Times*, suggests we are a nation deeply divided by our beliefs, and legal theorist Cass Sunstein concurs (*Republic.com*, 25). Strategies of reinforcement have been especially evident in preceding chapters, in which producers’ public discussion of *The West Wing* show a high degree of internal consistency regarding the status of the series as “quality television.” However, as a group, producers show less recognition or awareness of divergent or external evaluations of the show. Even the analysis of journalists, whose critical eyes regularly reveal and engage divergent points of view, takes on a cynical hue that in turn prompts consistent disengagement with the issues that plague them. For producers and journalists of *The West Wing*, Putnam’s bonding communities seem to be de rigeur.

In addition, despite some early rosy prognostications to the contrary (Rheingold), our prospects for creating and sustaining bridging communities online do not seem much brighter. Mark Poster, a cultural historian and social critic, suggests that the internet provides an opportunity to express a version of ourselves unrestrained (or at least somewhat less so)

by categories that otherwise shackle us in our daily, material lives.¹¹⁵ At the heart of this assertion is a claim about some fundamental differences among us, as if to suggest what the internet does best—even does fundamentally—is to provide more opportunities for us to cordon ourselves. Poster seems ambivalent about this: he is not sure whether we should look upon his assessment of the virtual world with heavy caution or some optimism.

And yet, I have suggested that two responses to this problem deserve closer consideration: one weak, which accepts these assertions but argues some communities resist their power, and one strong, which denies the accuracy of the assertions themselves. The online newsgroup forum dedicated to *The West Wing*, alt.tv.the-west-wing, serves as an intriguing counter to at least some of the reservations expressed by such critics. Online interaction is clearly a different form of communication from the encoded representations of television's producers or the broadcast texts of print journalists. While many of the representations that circulate via the internet are digitized versions of these forums, and many others have similar properties, some texts available online present us with strikingly different characteristics. Known by a variety of monikers ("forums," "boards," "newsgroups" "discussion groups"), these ongoing conversations between individuals come together less through geographic connection (which occurs but rarely) than through common interest in often fairly specialized topics. Online, you can communicate with a group of people who share your interest in a narrow subject area for which a reasonable geographic boundary would not produce enough potential participants to make the group viable. A quick browse through groups.google.com, the World Wide Web home of the old Usenet newsgroups, reveals forums that exist to communicate with others on almost any topic imaginable. These groups share a number of characteristics. They are dynamic, constantly changing as new

¹¹⁵ From "CyberDemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere" online.

posts are added. Threaded discussions can carry on over weeks, months, or even years, as new ideas are articulated or new participants accessing the newsgroup for the first time discover an archived thread and start up the discussion anew. Online forums are also interactive, at least to an extent: they allow individuals, or perhaps more accurately, distinct identities, to share information, ideas, opinions, and emotions encoded as electronic text that mimics but does not recreate the spoken word.¹¹⁶

Also, each online forum (like each physical community) has its own unique characteristics, and alt.tv.the-west-wing is no different. When we consider newsgroups dedicated to fan discourse in particular, we see characteristics more like the fanzines and mail-based communities described by Jenkins and Amesley than like most other newsgroups whose expressed goal is to circulate knowledge or engender discussion on science, society, or home improvement (to name a few). One goal of this chapter is to explain some of the apparently unique ways participants on alt.tv.the-west-wing choose to incorporate their identities in such discussions as *both* fans and as citizens.

In Chapter 1, I discussed contemporary definitions of fandom: that fans are dedicated to specific objects of aesthetic admiration, tend to seek out and promote communities of like-minded individuals, often critique the object text they admire, and often proliferate new texts in response that incorporate aspects of the universe in which their object exists. Contemporary definitions of citizenship exhibit some similarities and a few key differences. Most common are definitions like Sunstein's, that citizens practice "democratic self-government" (*Republic.com*, 195), and Van Zoonen's, that

¹¹⁶ For more on the nature of online communication as dynamic and interactive, see Rheingold (Chapter 2), Turkle (Chapter 10), and Baym (5-13).

they participate in making political decisions (2005, 9). To these we can add common inflections of citizenship with aspects of Putnam's argument, which ask us to recognize citizens who also "expect better government" and "express democratic values" in their public life (346). Finally, Beiner's entire project on political judgment is offered as "a redefinition of citizenship" (3). What all these conceptions of citizenship share is a sense that it implies an inherently social framework: citizens interact with one another, and they value one another's opinions, beliefs, and arguments (at least in broad terms). When we begin to look at the ways online forum participants interact, we see practices stemming from their public roles as both fans and citizens, as well as some practices that are best described as a product of the active articulation of these two roles. This articulation prompts us to think of these practices in a new way. I have labeled this new public style "fan citizenship."

What I argue here is that alt.tv.the-west-wing has produced a community in which the mingling of aesthetic and political judgments about both *The West Wing* and actual U.S. politics curtails contemporary tendencies toward selfish and cynical approaches to society. Unlike some forms of online communities, in which the focus of group discussion and daily interaction is on *either* aesthetic *or* political judgments, threads of discussion that freely intermingle politics and aesthetics are not only tolerated but in some cases encouraged.

Participants of alt.tv.the-west-wing are fans of the series, and as such they make evaluative judgments of its quality as a television series. They also identify as citizens, and they participate as such to varying degrees with the representations they encounter each week on the show. Most importantly, though, alt.tv.the-west-wing participants allow their passion for and knowledge of the program *as fictional television* to intermingle with, shape, and be

shaped by their passion for and knowledge of the program as a *representation of contemporary American politics*. This community has unique characteristics unlike many other online forums, and these characteristics promote specific outcomes in the interactions of the forum's participants.¹¹⁷ In producing and sustaining this unique community, the group works against the prevailing trends of fragmentation identified by critics like Putnam and Sunstein. Alt.tv.the-west-wing participants enact a kind of fan citizenship in its most robust sense: citizenship that is both informed and transformed by the practices and passions of fandom for *The West Wing*.

In order both to describe this arguably unique phenomenon and to tease out the primary dimensions of this style of interaction, this chapter proceeds in two parts. In the first section, I address three specific facets of the community enacted by the participants of alt.tv.the-west-wing that drive its structure and map the contours of its use. First, I make a case for how fellowship and the need for it among forum participants promotes a constant return to debate, despite sometimes venomous attacks and defenses of opposing viewpoints. The desire for fellowship—begun under the auspices of finding fellow “Wingnuts”—encourages tolerance of dissent and a spirit of play. The dynamic and interactive nature of newsgroups contribute significantly to this process in ways other forms of communication do not. Second, I address the status of practical knowledge among group members, and the role

¹¹⁷ The claim to uniqueness is based primarily on two sources. First, my anecdotal observations indicate most television fan forums are rigorously policed by their participants for content, i.e., posts and participants that seek to bring contemporary American politics into the discussion are usually reprimanded or even electronically removed from the forum by self-appointed forum police or a forum administrator. The goal is not so much malicious as to keep the forum from turning into a general discussion group. If the forum has been created to serve the specific needs and interests of a specific group (like *Buffy the Vampire* fans), then efforts are made by group members to keep most talk on the forum focused on that topic (see also my brief discussion of “OT” threads below). Second, some of the literature on online fan groups supports this (though I would argue there is no definitive statement in the online fandom literature). For example, Hills has suggested forums strive for consistency in content (see below), and Baym argues “topic” is an important facet of online communication (200).

it plays in balancing expert and ordinary talk as a means to negotiate a fan's relative lack of power in the circuit of cultural meaning and practices of identification. Newsgroup participants are not experts on *The West Wing*, but their knowledge is not without some qualities shared by that of experts. What they know about the series is "extra-ordinary" in that it relies on situated contexts for validity and on dissemination throughout the group, followed by verification through debate. Such practical knowledge is another key aspect of the kind of robust community encouraged by fan citizenship. Third, I identify the ways alt.tv.the-west-wing participants have allowed their aesthetic and political judgments of the series' value to intermingle. I offer an explanation for why we ought not to be surprised to find people devoted to a television show that represents politics also turn out to be devoted to political discussion, despite the notoriously vitriolic tone of much of the rest of online discourse.

In the second section, I provide two extended examples of the ways the promotion of fellowship through tolerance of dissent and play, the search for acquisition of practical, extra-ordinary knowledge, and the mingling aesthetic and political judgment become active resources upon which group participants may draw to make sense of their world. Significantly, these resources seem to help dampen the consumption-driven and cynical trends that keep other groups of *West Wing* viewers from overcoming tendencies toward disengagement. The prominent character that arises from study of alt.tv.the-west-wing participants is one whose passions for television and politics, together with a desire for fellowship with others who share such passions, drive open conflict but resist a turn away from opponents' equally passionate responses. This kind of forum participant—the "fan citizen"—may be a relatively new identity available to some who recognize the potential

benefits to the polity of allowing the boundaries between art, entertainment, and the public good to remain fuzzy and fluctuating.

Fellowship Of The Wing-Nuts¹¹⁸: The Importance of Being Fellows

One important element of any fan group is fellowship. Through participation in and belonging to a specific community, an individual's sense of connection to that community is strengthened. The nature of online community has been debated, and scholars have not reached consensus.¹¹⁹ However, many if not most forum participants wish to *claim* this sense of fellowship with other group members. Achieving some sense of fellow-feeling with other participants is important to one's identification with the group as a whole. In the case of *West Wing* fans, we can see two elements of this sense of fellowship that play recurring roles in the ongoing makeup of the forum: a tolerance of dissent and the maintenance of a place for humor and intellectual play.

Tolerance of Dissent

For decades scholars have studied fervent and closely knit groups of fans and found in them some keys to viewer activity and audiences' powers of resistance to the dominant control of the culture industries. The efficacy of such approaches to media studies has been contested, but its fundamental claim—that audiences are active—is rarely questioned except by media fear-mongers.¹²⁰ Earlier research on fan communities identified a number of practices specific to those communities. Matt Hills has argued that the advent of specifically

¹¹⁸ This term appears to have been coined by the creator of a popular *West Wing* fan site (wing_nuts.tripod.com).

¹¹⁹ Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* and Turkle's *Life on the Screen* are now-classic texts on this topic, but a variety of scholars including Steven Jones and Lev Manovich have touched on the debate.

¹²⁰ Regarding such contests, see, for example, the recent exchange among contributors to *Flow*, the online "critical forum on television and media culture" (*Flow*, volume 2, issues 5-7).

online fandom (among the so-called “new media”) produces subsequent changes in the practices of fans themselves:

Rather than new media technology merely allowing fans to share their speculations, commentaries, thoughts and questions, then, [computer-mediated communication] has seemingly placed a premium not only on the quality of fan response (i.e. there is a social pressure not to be too far ‘off-thread’, unless this situation is inverted due to a huge influx of newsgroup non-regulars) but also on the timing of fan response (178).

These two specific facets of online fan participation—topicality and timing—are especially significant for alt.tv.the-west-wing. Regarding the latter, the pattern Hills describes is much to the point: newsgroup participants follow a predictable schedule of posting frequency, mirroring NBC’s programming schedule during the weeks *The West Wing* airs new episodes. From Thursday morning to Wednesday afternoon newsgroup participants explode with responses to the show at first, then gradually taper off or spin-off into discussion not directly related to that week’s episode.¹²¹

However, with regard to the “quality” of postings, as Hills calls it (here “topicality” might be better, to avoid confusion with quality television), we can see something relatively unique to alt.tv.the-west-wing, at least as far as other scholars have indicated in their own work on online fan communities: Online participation is both an extension of and a unique development beyond non-electronic communities.¹²² Communities that develop along geographic lines to promote television fandom are similar in their structures, practices, and topics to their online, electronic counterparts. As Hills has suggested, much of the discourse

¹²¹ This is true even Wednesday at 9:00 pm Eastern Standard Time to the following Wednesday afternoon, and when the series switched to Sunday nights in later seasons, the posting pattern predictably shifted as well.

¹²² Previously, I have argued for the malleability and social construction of quality among *West Wing* viewers, and it may appear here that I have privileged a particular understanding of quality in my reading of Hills. I am cognizant of this slippage. However, the characteristics of his use of quality (“type,” “nature”) are altogether inconsistent with the uses we have discussed thus far (“sophisticated,” “intellectual,” and “powerful”). I therefore find the shift in terminology here to be more illuminating of the differences in usage than undermining any theoretical foundation.

of online forums is often constrained by a pressure to remain focused on the group's "topic," and participants may find significant social pressure from other forum participants to refrain from posting comments not directly related to that topic.

If we move far away from television fans among online groups, we see this pattern quite clearly: pregnant women motivated by anticipatory excitement and biological anxieties post their questions for more seasoned mothers on Babycenter.com forums, seeking knowledge, support, and kinship to ease their worries. Fans of Notre Dame football post on NDNation.com in search of tidbits of analysis and insight pertaining to current and future teams' championship prospects. And so forth: each forum is shaped by the specific interests of the participants, perhaps not surprisingly.¹²³

However, alt.tv.the-west-wing has managed to maintain at least some ambiguity on the question of topicality. Though the community is far from unanimous agreement, and there have been a handful of in-depth debates about it, the group has maintained a space for acceptance of a much wider variety of topicality than is common on other forums. Unlike many other newsgroups whose posts are often strictly moderated and kept clear of "off-topic" discussions, the breadth of topics on alt.tv.the-west-wing frequently extends well beyond what one might expect.¹²⁴ One is likely to find threads directly discussing that week's episode alongside one drawing reader attention to an appearance by a series regular

¹²³ Baym argues there is a dearth of work in this area: "Despite its centrality, topic is a woefully understudied influence on online community....the topics and purposes around which online communities organize are at least as important as the medium in shaping a group's communication patterns" (200).

¹²⁴ Off-topic discussion are those that are considered by members of a newsgroup to be somehow outside the scope of that group: for example, on alt.tv.the-west-wing, there has been some discussion about whether talk of Rob Lowe, a *West Wing* regular for three seasons who left the show and now stars in another NBC primetime drama, *The Lyon's Den*, should be labeled "OT" for off-topic. Frequently, off-topic threads are eliminated from the traffic regularly posted within a particular group, either by re-posting them to a group in which they would have more relevance or removing them completely from the web. The original proposal for the newsgroup indicated it was "for the discussions between fans of the NBC tv show, 'The West Wing.'" On many other newsgroups, this topic would potentially exclude the great variety of threads on alt.tv.the-west-wing that deal solely with contemporary American politics.

on *Regis and Kelly* and another labeled “OT” that discusses the political efficacy of school vouchers. Further, within a single thread (threads can be hundreds of individual posts), the discussion can freely shift from an episode’s use of lighting, to a discussion of the use of military power in Iraq, to preferences for taping episodes (with or without commercials), and back to the episode’s visual style.¹²⁵ This is, of course, how most discussions (and especially fan discussions) involving multiple participants and more-or-less open themes develop and progress. In the case of alt.tv.the-west-wing, discussion of contemporary U.S. politics is quite common. On other *West Wing* forums, this is not necessarily the case: uk.media.tv.westwing, a newsgroup based in England, explicitly opposes discussions about politics in its FAQ.¹²⁶ By contrast, it is not at all unusual to find extensive discussions of contemporary issues of policy and their political, social, and economic implications on alt.tv.the-west-wing. Most often, these threads develop out of issues raised on the series, but can just as easily appear in reference to a post about President Bush, the war in Iraq, or some other politically relevant topic without any apparent connection to the show.

U.S. politics and political culture are so much a part of the fundamental character of this fan community that in the absence of new episodes to discuss, U.S. politics itself, and especially the 2000 and 2004 election campaigns, became not just *a* dimension of the ongoing discussion of the group, but *the* primary focus of its attention and debate.¹²⁷ Sometimes posters use the “OT” (off topic) designation for their posts on an election or discussion of a political topic, and other times they do not. Often posts that discuss politics

¹²⁵ Each of the preceding examples did occur during my study of the forum.

¹²⁶ Perhaps notably, though, there have been threads in that group from time to time that seek to understand differences between American and British politics. Presumably, the group’s participants interpret these questions as helpful to understanding the content of each week’s episode, rather than “about” politics per se.

¹²⁷ This happened frequently during each season hiatus and was especially true from May through September of 2004 during the presidential election campaigns.

not directly related to a topic discussed on an episode will be labeled “OT,” but not always. In fact, there has been little attempt on the part of the group as a whole to standardize the procedure for labeling posts not directly related to the series. Some group leaders and frequent posters have sought to codify interaction in this way, but it has been met with apathy and even resistance by others for whom the slippage between fictional and actual politics appears to be understood as a healthy and welcome aspect of this particular forum.

The boundary to which Hills draws our attention—between “topical” and “off-topic” posts—is fluidly and repeatedly crossed. It might be more accurate to say the boundary is dissolved, in the sense that it is never entirely clear from moment to moment and thread to thread whether posts about actual political subjects and issues are on- or off- topic. The group has a relatively high tolerance for allowing individual members to decide what *political* issues are not directly relevant to the community.¹²⁸ Contra Hills’ observations, alt.tv.the-west-wing allows specifically fan discourse about the show and its own community-oriented interests in politics and policy to articulate messily and organically from day to day. Thus, the specific form of the activity undertaken by many fans of *The West Wing* indicates an interest in rehearsing and coordinating representations of political culture from the show with understandings of actual politics in their daily lives from a variety of situated perspectives. Participants are understood to be fans of *The West Wing*, and because there is little consensus among them about how the show articulates the boundary between fiction and fact, and whether that articulation is valid or appropriate, the community tolerates a fair degree of disagreement and dissent on a host of issues ranging from topicality to forum procedures to

¹²⁸ This is mostly true of threads specifically about politics and policy: members remain quite traditional about which television posts should be considered “OT” (posts about other shows, for example).

political party preferences. This aspect of alt.tv.the-west-wing discourages cynicism by encouraging engagement regardless of disagreement.

Humor and Play

The language of many *West Wing* fans is couched in humor and play in ways that expand the possibilities for understanding the series at the same time that they deflate potential tension and fear. Humor cannot make these things go away; some participants are even rebuked for what is construed by others as an overly cavalier attitude.¹²⁹ But, participants' ability to read others' approaches to *The West Wing* in a spirit of play helps to promote its role as a cultural rehearsal in ways direct critique often cannot. In talking about the show with others in a playful mode, without taking any particular aspect too seriously, viewers produce readings less grounded in a strict interpretation of the series' representations and more open to contestation.

When I use the term "cultural rehearsal," I refer to the ways cultural texts perform a specific preparatory function for many consumers. A text provides the opportunity for cultural rehearsal when it represents a world through which viewers can participate in practices of identification similar to practices in which they might engage in their daily lives. Brian Eno writes of the role films play in our lives this way:

What are we watching in these films? We are seeing ideas being exercised for us, seeing how things fit together or don't, what the implications of collisions between them might be....Isn't it the fact that we have this huge amount of cultural rehearsal in how things could otherwise be, how things could look from someone else's eyes, that enables us to understand each other and co-operate with each other?¹³⁰

This sense of rehearsal as preparation, as an opportunity to practice our responses to situations for which we may only have time to react when actually encountered, encourages us to recognize the latent political power inherent in a cultural text that represents politics. In fact, many of the cultural practices we identify as humor and play—jokes, pranks, satire,

¹²⁹ A hint of this is on display in the "can't just make shit up" comment below, but it occurs elsewhere as well.

¹³⁰ Excerpted from "Culture" at <<http://www.norwich2008.com/profiles/brianenoessay.htm>>.

farce—are another kind of rehearsal in that they allow us to use and extend cultural texts into realms and spaces for which they have not otherwise been constructed. The participants of alt.tv.the-west-wing employ humor and play in a manner that often allows them to extend their understanding of the series’ representations beyond the more stringent boundaries the producers’ constructions have outlined for them.

In considering this element of online participants’ approach to *The West Wing*, allow me to detour from alt.tv.the-west-wing to another newsgroup, soc.history.what-if. This latter group is not “about” *The West Wing* in the way alt.tv.the-west-wing is. Instead, this group proposes alternative events to actual history and then conjectures about possible outcomes to those events. According to the group’s FAQ page [Frequently Asked Questions]:

This is a friendly place where we reject the idea that there are inevitable forces of history that push us towards an inevitable historical outcome. We refute this determinism, and have a lot of fun while doing so, by considering the different possible outcomes of historical events. We explore alternate history, historical what-ifs, allohistory and counterfactuals. We change the past to learn about the consequences, for better or worse, of actions that might have been taken in the past, and to appreciate the role of chance and luck.

Described this way, one may ask what relevance the group’s discussions could have to the present study? What makes this newsgroup’s use of *The West Wing* even more interesting than the fundamental mission as it is described here is this: posts on soc.history.what-if about the series allow for its “universe” (the fictional world in which characters and events of the series interact) to exist as one more “alternate history” alongside fictional imaginings set in our own universe. These are not journalists or trained historians operating under professional standards or vying for readers. These are individuals interested in alternate histories, and they count the world of *The West Wing* among the possible versions. In doing so, they wink

at themselves and their readers, allowing a moment of suspension of disbelief that opens an opportunity to consider the relationship between fiction and fact in an altogether novel way.

They achieve this playful consideration of the fiction/fact boundary through what soc.history.what-if participants refer to as a “double-blind what-if.” The FAQ has this to say:

A "double-blind" WI [what if] is one that pretends to be posted from an alternative history. Frequently, but not always, this takes the form of asking "what if" about something from real history, treating it as if it hadn't happened, e.g. "What if England had resisted Napoleon successfully?" Sometimes it will be clear what the author wants to pretend happened instead, sometimes not....One regular appearance on [soc.history.what-if] is the "West Wing," a thread discussing contemporary events as if they were from the television drama of the same name. This is not an invitation to discuss contemporary political issues, but rather a running joke regarding the dramatic implausibilites [sic] of real history.

In these so-called double-blind what-ifs, the ruse is never exposed directly to the reader. Not only does the ruse continue indefinitely in this way, but it is the product of a typically collaborative mélange of ideas and attitudes: the thread continues in one fictional direction, splits into two, dies in one, continues in the other, etc.¹³¹

Notice here, too, the somewhat strong construction of denial toward “contemporary political issues”: unlike alt.tv.the-west-wing, group participants in soc.history.what-if are reminded that the presence of discussion about *The West Wing* is “not an invitation” to dwell on these issues, but instead “a running joke” about drama. Hills’ description of newsgroups is relatively accurate here: soc.history.what-if maintains a concept of the boundaries within which posts are considered tolerable and acceptable by the group’s own participants.

However, *The West Wing* double-blind what-if has managed to escape the off-topic orbit, achieving relevance within a forum that expressly denies comments upon other fictions.

¹³¹ The “The West Wing” threads on soc.history.what-if continue since they began in November of 2002. The most recent thread to elicit some discussion in the group is “The West Wing Election Episode,” begun on November 3, 2004 and describing the implausibilities of the Bush victory “on the show.”

The actual practice of maintaining such a knowing political commentary *and* fictional ruse brings with it the ability to play with interpretation of both fiction and fact along multiple simultaneous axes and through multiply inflected dimensions. For example, consider the following post from the “The West Wing” thread:

I think the most fascinating aspect of this show is how Sorkin reinvented the past 30 years. Who else found it hilarious that he made a bad actor the defining politician of the '80s? I don't see why he had to rename Indochina to Vietnam, but making the US _lose_ to some east asian guerillas? And the fall of communism - 1991? Talk about an idealist. I still remember when Fox News covered the fall of the Wall in 1996. Sorkin's a bit mad, methinks (WhatIf1).¹³²

Regarding the September 11 attacks, the same poster later adds,

Its such an incredibly unrealistic scenario - I swear, if this had happened in real life, Bartlett and Company would have found this guy in a month.

Embedded in this brief double-blind are references to the ongoing in-joke about Reagan’s post-Hollywood presidency, a nod to Americans’ perennial faith in the power of their own government, and a re-writing of the facts of the Berlin Wall destruction in order to allow Fox News to have covered it. In addition, there are repeated references to Sorkin as television auteur and a nod to the willing acceptance among *West Wing* fans of the fictional Bartlett administration as a cure to all actual federal ills (especially during the early seasons when this post was written).

The ability of this kind of rhetorical construction to invoke the instantiation of a radically new perspective—in fact, a mirror image of reality—allows us, in turn, to consider what might be the stakes in making a claim for or against realism with regard to fiction in

¹³² In order to comply with restrictions imposed by Indiana University’s Research on Human Subjects Committee, I have replaced all usernames of online participants with descriptive monikers (e.g.: “WhatIf1,” “WhatIf2,” etc.). However, this poses a problem for thorough citation. In order to balance these needs, I have included in the Works Cited a citation for only the full thread within which each individual post occurs. In each case, the first occurrence from a new thread is accompanied by a footnote indicating the title of the citation. For the “WhatIf” posts, the citation may be found in Works Cited under “The West Wing,” soc.history.what-if.

general and *The West Wing* more specifically. By achieving this new perspective through knowing play instead of straightforward critique, forum participants give themselves ideological room to maneuver. More options are left open not only for the kind of critique available to an author, but its intensity as well. “Who else found it hilarious that he made a bad actor the defining politician of the '80s?” is a less directed and intense form of “Reagan, the bad actor, exemplifies the absurd political landscape of the 80s.” More valences, more registers, and a greater range of voices become available to group participants in this mode of response and interplay.

Interestingly, their own charter and subsequently updated FAQ specifically prohibits this kind of discussion:

Non-alternate-history Fiction

The word "history" appears in the newsgroup name. Thus, questions like "What if Luke Skywalker had not destroyed the Death Star?" which involve entirely fictional (non-alternate history) universes are not appropriate. There is certainly a better newsgroup for such questions (e.g. rec.arts.sf.starwars.misc, in the case of Luke and the Death Star).¹³³

Here the group openly and specifically denies acceptance of any post that what-ifs what the community now refers to as “non-alternate-history” fiction.¹³⁴ In this way, shows like *The West Wing*, situated within a world similar to our own in specific ways (most notably, through reference to real people and events as is common on *The West Wing*), are allowed a privileged status by the group. Though shows like *Dark Angel* are “not appropriate” for the group (since that show is set in a future reality), shows like *The West Wing* are, because the history referenced therein is roughly analogous to the history of Our Time Line.

¹³³ In the case of questions about *The West Wing*, it would surely be alt.tv.the-west-wing.

¹³⁴ In the earliest incarnations of the FAQ from the mid-90s, this was simply “fiction.” It appears to have been changed with the frequent repetition of the use of *West Wing* as a viable topic of discussion.

Thus, soc.history.what-if is not at all some rule-bending fringe newsgroup with its own ideology and standards. In fact, while the nature of the group's identity is somewhat novel and opens participants up to a variety of modes of address less valid among other online communities, the group operates in other ways much as we might predict. In line with Hills' schema, group members actively attempt to solidify and lock down group boundaries to keep unwanted posts off the boards. For example, one participant chastises another for not recognizing the nature of the double-blind-fiction game:

On that note there is another thread of how are we going to pay for this war? Invest in body bags and sympathy cards, gently push up to \$2 gas and hope the new econ guys understand it has to be rising in the fall of 2004 (WhatIf2).
Leaving aside the fact that you're taking an on-topic AH [alternate history] post and turning it into an off-topic political discussion, why would investing in body bags be a good idea? Do you think the Iraquis [sic] will buy them from us (WhatIf3)?

WhatIf2 raises the specter of "contemporary political issues," and WhatIf3 acknowledges the boundary crossing in one breath and responds to the question in the next. This movement in and out of character, so to speak, relies on an attempt to police the boundary between the double-blind what-if game involving *The West Wing* double-blind fiction and the rest of the posts in the forum. This occurs at the same time the boundary between reality and fiction is openly blurred within and through the use of the double-blind game itself. Though these newsgroup participants apparently appreciate the importance and usefulness of play, they nonetheless appear to desire at least some boundaries that are recognizable and can be policed.

The preceding detour to discuss the practices of soc.history.what-if is beneficial for two reasons. First, while the present study makes no claims to speak for all television viewers or all online forum participants, there are clearly some similar practices at work

among participants of both alt.tv.the-west-wing and soc.history.what-if. Whether these similarities can be attributed to the nature of all online archived forums, all fans who discuss their programs online, or a unique combination of some entirely different set of factors, the ability to see *West Wing* fans in different forums with differing agendas considering similar issues such as how to manage the fiction/fact boundary is instructive in itself. It at minimum suggests some of the practices that drive the specific development of the fan citizen style on alt.tv.the-west-wing exist among some other groups, which by extension suggests that while the forum may appear unique in some ways, the possibility for the development of such character types elsewhere on the web is not unlikely.

Second, use of play and humor to alter the register and tone of soc.history.what-if is a common and effective tactic within many newsgroups. In soc.history.what-if, the sense of play has been put to extended use in group members' rhetorical construction of reality and their ability to critique it. In alt.tv.the-west-wing, play and humor are sprinkled throughout. First, there are the weekly comments by long-time group regulars about each new episode: what they found interesting, frustrating, and funny. A line found funny will often draw others to comment on other lines or narrative moments that strike them as funny. Group participants will also frequently bring articles or news items they find humorous or absurd to the group's attention, especially if committed by and/or happen to politicians or other government officials.

This is not particularly surprising if one subscribes to the notion that online forums are kinds of community: everyone likes to have a laugh with their friends. However, in this case, as with soc.history.what-if to a lesser extent, playfulness can sometimes have the effect of softening the overall tone of the group. While the overall number of posts in which play is

enacted is relatively small, their presence at all makes the argument for their role. Rather than to suggest a significant impact upon the interactions among the group, I argue they form one of an array of strategies for group interaction.

At its most effective, humor strengthens bonds of community. As Baym notes, humor is a powerful tool for maintaining fellowship (32, 106). Especially when understood as a means to extend and “play with” the limits of the series’ own text, humor becomes a powerfully subversive tool for textual poachers at the very same time that it encourages fellowship among group members and strengthens the bonds of community, even through the lens of the digital interface.

“Extra-Ordinary” Knowledge

Being a fan of a television show and participating in a fan community can be a passion-filled experience. The show can become the focus of incredible productive energies, a fact for which the many instances of fan fiction and fan dedication websites stand as evidence.¹³⁵ As noted above, ethnographic research into the nature of fan motives indicates that fans see the work they do in building and sustaining their fan communities as an extension of and an homage to the fictional universe the program’s texts have created. I have not made an attempt to analyze the nature of the fan activity among alt.tv.the-west-wing participants, choosing instead to accept the fan activity in which they are involved as the context within which their more unusual political discussion takes place: for example, seeking copies of episodes on tape, alerting others to appearances of *The West Wing*’s stars on talk shows, and debating the details of the series’ narrative intricacies.

However, it is important to recognize part of what argues for alt.tv.the-west-wing as a unique forum is not simply participants’ interest in political discussion but the specific way

¹³⁵ See for example: bewarene.westwing.com, wingnuts.com.

the group intermingles their discussions of the series as fans and their discussions of actual politics. Much of the discussion on alt.tv-the-west-wing shifts back and forth between aesthetic and political judgment, as we will see below. More importantly, each informs the other. In terms of their motives for posting, group members seem to be seeking not only knowledge but understanding and fellowship as well. Each of these elements is interwoven with the others: knowledge gained informs understanding of the series and increases friendships, new friendships open new possibilities for knowledge and understanding, and contextualized understanding encourages dissemination of practical knowledge and deepening of friendships. In addition, each of these three modes operates on the forum for both aesthetic discourse (which often correlates with fan passion for a text) and political discourse (correlated to individual roles as citizens).

Take for example the way realism tends to work for *West Wing* fans. While producers encourage a specific understanding of realism linked to quality, and journalists are skeptical if not anxious about a perceived boundary between fiction and reality, fans have observed for some time that the *West Wing* universe appears to be an alternate one to our own—neither entirely or even mostly distinct, nor primarily the same. While the history of the U.S. presidency is more or less a one-to-one parallel with our own, the details of exactly how President Bartlet might fit into that history are up for grabs. Attempts to crystallize these subtle differences as knowledge, and by extension better understand the ways these factual differences influence the narrative and characters of the show, appear on the forum with great regularity. Newsgroup participants have used the forum to attempt to ascertain where Bartlet might fit into the hypothetical U.S. political landscape. While an answer with absolute certainty is not available to them, *West Wing* fans have nonetheless engaged in an

active attempt to answer these questions. Lacking the ability to obtain certainty, group members rely on practical reason to make their judgments. In shaping their attitudes about the show as fans, they necessarily shape their attitudes as citizens about contemporary politics. Though practical questions about the *West Wing* timeline end up being answered practically, the nature of the forum as a space for discussion and debate encourages consideration of the ways such practical questions are necessarily supported by more theoretical questions that must also be answered. Participants' fervor as fans to understand and know the text in this case prompts fervor to understand and know the particulars of U.S. politics as well.

The specific question has been raised numerous times: how well (or not) does *The West Wing* universe match up with our own? For example, in April of 2001, in response to comments on the episode "17 People" in which a character mentions there are "seven and a half months to the Iowa caucus," the newsgroup community re-engages the unsettled issue:

"2002—A Presidential Election Year" An interesting stretch, n'est pas (ElectionYear1)?¹³⁶

Not really. Aaron Sorkin has said several times he is deliberately distancing "The West Wing" world from the "real world" and having the election cycle be two years off is one way of doing that. He also said on Mighty Big TV's forum that after "20 Hours in LA" with Jay Leno and David Hasselhoff (sp?) that he felt a bit uncomfortable after that episode because it tied TWW a bit too closely to "the real world," i.e. if there's a Jay Leno in TWW-land, why isn't there a George W. Bush (ElectionYear2)?

This has been re-hashed many times, but do we know for sure what year it is in the WW universe (assuming what you meant by "stretch" is "stretch of reality or credulity" not "quite an interesting stretch of time to deal with between now and the election") (ElectionYear3)?

Luck of the draw, actually. The show was always set to begin after the [p]resident's first year in office. It didn't get picked up by NBC for a couple of

¹³⁶ Posts in the "ElectionYear" thread are referenced in the Works Cited under "2002 – A Presidential Election Year."

years, though, so that made the timing off. Like I said in another post, I'm surprised they mentioned it - mainly because when it enters eternity on cable, it wouldn't be noticed (ElectionYear4).

How to explain the obvious inconsistency between the year in which we have our presidential elections, the year the episode aired (2001), and the reference to the Iowa caucus? For these participants, it is a question in need of an answer, but without definitive evidence, prudent answers based on probable evidence are mobilized instead. ElectionYear2 suggests the producers are trying to maintain a tension between similarity and distance; ElectionYear4 indicates the episode was probably already written to some extent when production circumstances skewed the details. In both instances, the posts' authors draw upon contextually specific available evidence to make fitting aesthetic and political judgments, as any prudent actor would.

Each of these attempts to contextualize what appears to be some kind of error or gaff in the writing draws upon evidence that, while not definite, is still a matter of public record and could reasonably explain the inconsistency. The extent to which consistency is itself a prized trait among television fans harkens to the claims of maniacal intensity Jenkins bemoaned in *Textual Poachers*. While some might wonder why such questions matter to fans, this issue can be closely linked to the same kinds of anxieties as those addressed in Chapter 3 regarding the relationship between fiction and fact. However, while journalists rarely interact dynamically with others, which tends to harden their responses, newsgroup participants use the forum's interactivity to constantly reengage with the problem and continue looking for answers.

This example of how newsgroup participants use practical knowledge to deal with problems and questions they encounter in their viewing of the show—and particularly how

they enact that knowledge in their interactions with others on the newsgroup—leads us to address the status of the situated answers participants can offer others seeking them.

The participants in alt.tv.the-west-wing hold a status somewhere between the categories of “ordinary” and “expert.”¹³⁷ The ordinary “does not necessarily mean ‘average,’ ‘typical,’ or ‘representative of the population in general’” (18). Instead, people are often expected to “discuss personal matters...in a particular way ... joy, sorrow, rage, or remorse expressed in visible, bodily terms” (19). This is an important subtext of the relationships between newsgroup participants. While the newsgroup as a medium of exchange cannot place the body of one participant in view of others, the importance of raw—as raw as is possible in the textually mediated realm of the internet—direct experience is fundamental to the form many newsgroups have taken over the years. Arguably, as awareness of the presence of other bodies recedes, immediacy and rawness of language goes up. This would account for much of the notoriously coarse language found across the web today.

However, expression on alt.tv.the-west-wing can be contrasted with Laura Grindstaff’s version of “ordinary” in some distinct ways. While on daytime talk television programs, “what is said...is often the least important part of any given show” (21), the what-is-said of a newsgroup is almost the only thing readers have available. Encounters with disembodied subjects have been a fundamental facet of scholarship of online communication since its inception; diachronic communication is much more likely because of the way online texts can be archived and decoded long after the text has been physically created and uploaded to a web server.¹³⁸ Because of the relative power of the what-is-said (in the form of

¹³⁷ I am using these terms in the way Laura Grindstaff has outlined them in *The Money Shot* (xx), an ethnographic study of the guests of daytime talk television programs. While the genre bears little resemblance to *The West Wing*, her categories for understanding knowledge in a social context are helpful.

¹³⁸ See Rheingold (Chapter 5), Turkle (9-26), and Poster.

text on the computer screen), newsgroup participants' experience is ultimately understood as rooted in their language.

In addition, participants do not limit themselves to direct experience in formulating their arguments. Many posters marshal other sources (websites, books, magazine and newspaper articles, referenced through hyperlinks to their electronic versions) as evidence in their defense and expect readers to accept such sources as valid and appropriate for the group as a whole. However, participants are also comfortable raising questions about articles. In the thread titled "Dallas Morning News Article," MorningNews5 writes "since when does 'bible' refer to a season long outline? TWW does have a continuity bible, even though it would seem that they've misplaced it under a pile of newspapers somewhere and refuse to go look for it. :-P." In raising the question about the article, the poster not only interjects personal knowledge and experience about the series but also raises an oblique question about the internal consistency of recent episodes.

A third important difference between Grindstaff's "ordinary" people and many of the participants on alt.tv.the-west-wing is the latter's clear desire to distance themselves from the likes of the former through their deep appreciation of *The West Wing*. Based on comments they make about non-viewers as well as other participants, an important element of some posters' participation in the newsgroup is rooted in their sense that the quality of the series allows them to maintain some aesthetic and theoretical distance from the ordinary. *West Wing* viewers frequently and conspicuously highlight its intelligence and sophistication, delineating and policing an imposed boundary between their show and ordinary television. In this way, online fans take up and promote the specific aspects of *The West Wing*'s quality, identified and codified by its producers. However, whereas *West Wing* producers' public

discourse about the series suggests their interest in producing something economically viable, fans understand quality as an element of the series that makes it stand out from the rest of television (which by extension makes them stand out as discerning viewers who watch it). In the “Isaac and Ishmael” thread discussion below, we see how the need to separate oneself as a television viewer drives the very need for discussion of the series itself.

Further, just as Grindstaff argues that the program’s participants differentiate their style of delivery with regard to these raw personal moments, we can also distinguish a different style of delivery as more common to the participants of the newsgroup in their discourse about it. This is especially true when the conversation turns to politics:

Often, the story of how cultural objects come into existence—how diverse actions are coordinated, how decisions are made, how conflicts are mediated, how norms and conventions are challenged, followed, or ignored—is as interesting and revealing as the object itself, for ways of talking about the production of popular culture are simultaneously ways of talking about society and social relations (Grindstaff 34).

Thus, as group participants mobilize comments about “ordinary” or “regular” viewers of other programs, their sense of the series as “worthwhile” allows them to separate themselves from the rest of the television audience, ultimately internalizing an important aspect of the signaling in which the program’s text appears to be engaged. Taken together, these facets of experience and practical knowledge situate the status of the *West Wing* fan as somewhere between “ordinary” and “expert.” As fans, they are socially marginalized,¹³⁹ but regarding the series itself—and especially for certain long-standing group participants—their situated experience with and knowledge of the series identifies them as beyond that of the “ordinary.”

In rhetorically constructing and sustaining this “extra-ordinary” status via their discussion on alt.tv.the-west-wing, newsgroup participants use practical knowledge to help

¹³⁹ See Ang 1995, Jenkins, Hills.

police perceived boundaries between themselves and non-fans. This kind of situated, practical knowledge becomes the grease that keeps the community's most basic functions—to circulate and deliberate over new knowledge regarding *The West Wing*—working smoothly from day to day. Without a robust use of practical knowledge, the forum could thin out into a place participants simply go to glean the latest series news, a danger all television forums face. Instead, the practical connections between fiction and reality raised by the visual economy of each episode and then immediately suppressed are re-examined and re-opened, allowing group members to reconsider their validity and examine their own citizenship in the process.

Mingling Judgments

In addition to tolerance of dissent, acceptance of humor and play, and regular use of practical knowledge to solve problems, the responses of participants in alt.tv.the-west-wing suggest a greater willingness to accept a porous boundary between entertainment and politics. Not unlike the face-to-face conversations that take place every day in living rooms, back-yards, bars, and offices, the digitally archived discussions of alt.tv.the-west-wing range freely across any number of topics even within a single thread. In allowing their evaluation of the series as an aesthetic object to intermingle with their evaluation of it as a cultural rehearsal of U.S. politics, forum participants arguably enact something relatively unique: as a group, they accept the notion that the rigid boundary commonly drawn between fiction and reality is transgressable. Instead of seeking to police it by placing texts, representations, and meanings in clearly defined Aristotelian categories, they rhetorically construct a practical space in which the elements of fiction and reality can be allowed free interaction.

Even when distilled in the most general way possible, the comments posted in alt.tv.the-west-wing can be broadly divided into three categories: posts that refer solely to the aesthetics of *The West Wing* as a television program, posts that refer exclusively in some way to U.S. politics, and posts that draw connections between the two.¹⁴⁰ The third type exists as an especially fertile instance of the kinds of intermingling of aesthetics and politics I wish to highlight. The examples with which I began this project in Chapter 1 will help us to think through how this mingling is enacted in the forum and what its possibilities and limitations might be.

In April of 2001, after George W. Bush had been in office for a few months and *The West Wing* had almost completed its second season, the following was posted to the group:

Well I have not read any spoilers nor have I been active on this ng [newsgroup] so this may have been discussed here already or I could just be way out of line but I would not be surprised if the season ender focuses on articles of impeachment. Perjury can arguable [sic] be thought of as coming under the auspices of "high crimes and misdemeanors" and if Bartlett has perjured himself along the way regarding his illness then this scenario could be one possibility (Impeach1).¹⁴¹

Framed by the breathless accumulation of caveats in the opening sentence, this post most simply implies an author interested in speculation about the third season. As such, it is a common enough starting point for a newsgroup thread, comparable versions of which can be found throughout television discussion forums and newsgroups online almost daily. Fans of

¹⁴⁰ Beyond these three categories, while the occasional post may arise, forum participants are likely to use standard online forum techniques to chastise, rebuke, or otherwise police any posts that do not fit them. While the forum is arguably unique in the ways I describe, in many other ways it is entirely similar to other forums across the web: participants still police the forum for off-topic threads, the major difference being that comments about politics that have nothing to do with the explicit content of the show are tolerated (though there is some disagreement on whether this is efficacious).

¹⁴¹ These comments are in reference to an ongoing narrative arc introduced in the second season in which President Bartlet was discovered to have been keeping his multiple sclerosis secret from almost everyone except his wife, Abby, who is a doctor and had supposedly been helping him treat it with medication she prescribed. The "Impeach" posts are referenced in the Works Cited under "Impeach Bartlet," alt.tv.the-west-wing.

nearly every television show post to online forums and newsgroups with varying regularity and speculate similarly.

This post has the potential to spark a thread similar to thousands of others in alt.tv,¹⁴² in that it invites other fans to imagine down which paths the narrative arc of the series might move in future episodes. This baton is taken up readily enough in the first response:

I think it will be an issue of speculation around the WW, but I'd personally bet that they'd save the bulk of that controversy for next season as Bartlett gears up for the election. Perjury seems like it's ruled out, but I'm sure they could find some high crime or misdemeanor in a Prez who runs for office without revealing a serious physical illness (Impeach2).

At this point in the discussion, there is a clear vector of appropriate¹⁴³ talk available on the general topic of the plausibility of an impeachment storyline, whether what Bartlett has done constitutes perjury, and whether either direction would be accepted by viewers. In the sense that these topics are found appropriate by forum participants, this is not yet all that different from the kind of talk found on any other television fan forum, or nearly any forum, for that matter.

Participants in alt.tv.the-west-wing freely intermingle their thoughts on the aesthetic and entertainment value of the series with their thoughts on the validity and efficacy of the policies the show promotes. This, in turn, often quickly leads to discussion of actual policies and judgments about them. Here, a fragment of the discussion turns to considerations of real-world presidential ethical missteps:

¹⁴² The naming convention of newsgroup forums is most often to separate successively smaller categories by a period, and the titles of multi-word topics with dashes. Therefore, in "alt.tv.the-west-wing", the forum itself is about "the-west-wing," which is a subset of the "tv" subset of "alt". "Alt.tv" includes all forums about specific television series in the "alt" category, which is, in terms of quantities of posts, the largest of the major newsgroup categories (this includes others such as "rec", dedicated to pastimes and hobbies like ".animals", ".antiques", and ".autos", and "sci", for forums about particular sciences, such as ".aeronautics", ".anthropology", and ".astronomy").

¹⁴³ In the sense of "reasonable," in that responses relating to the plausibility of impeachment make sense following a post specifically inviting them.

They could make one up, but given that we have a real-world President who for decades concealed a DUI conviction, refused to discuss his coke habit, and basically makes Gilligan look like Bill Nye the Science Guy, I think any WW impeachment plot devolving from the MS condition would be sick and wrong (Impeach3).

As with any conversation, group members following the thread have a range of responses available to them, extending from direct attack to sarcastic rebuke to whole-hearted agreement or silence. This post's mingling of fact (the conviction), rumor (the habit), and personal opinion ("sick and wrong") prompts little comment except that it is common across many internet forum contexts. We might anticipate a return to the original question posed at this point: whether season 3 will prominently feature discussion of Bartlet's possible impeachment in the structure of each week's narrative. This turn would be expected if we think of online communities as in some way emaciated versions of "more robust" face-to-face communications, prone to the use of language to stifle dissent and reproduce the narrowly defined (for that community) status quo, as Sunstein argues (2001, 190). Fragmented as this community would necessarily be under this theory, other group members would seek to steer the discussion back toward "on-topic" issues. In fact, this is quite common on all kinds of online forums, especially those that are moderated by specific individuals. Even those that are not, however, commonly display the use of social pressure ("that kind of comment is not appropriate on this board," "take those comments somewhere else") to shape the boundaries of topicality for a particular group.¹⁴⁴ By recognizing a forum

¹⁴⁴ To date, I am not aware of any kind of study that addresses such issues. In lieu of such, work, anecdotal evidence will have to suffice. As for evidence, in forums as diverse as talk.religion.course-miracle, rec.music.opera, alt.dads-rights.unmoderated, milw.general, alt.magick and alt.politics.usa.constitution, some variant of "that kind of comment is not appropriate for this forum" can be found. There are no such posts on alt.tv.the-west-wing, though there have been discussions about what should be counted as "off-topic." Should new work become available, I would certainly be willing to reconsider my claims to alt.tv.the-west-wing's uniqueness, but such a development would also bolster my case for these practices' potential to become more widespread.

for the affronting comment probably does exist elsewhere online, the poster suggests that derision is not only acceptable but appropriate.

But such behavior is not as common an occurrence on alt.tv.the-west-wing. Instead, participants more often make a double move that suggests their identification with *The West Wing* has significant consequences for their public roles as fans and citizens: the group accepts there are two realms, entertainment and politics, at the same time that they deny the necessity for those two realms to remain distinct. In their conversation about the series, the two realms most often become blurred. Here, the thread turns away from the show explicitly and toward actual politics:

Heck we had a real world president who WAS up for impeachment for perjury and obstruction of justice and HE deserved it. Bush has never denied his problems with alcohol &/or drugs. He has just very plainly stated that he made mistakes in his past and will not discuss them. Had ANY past president made similar statements about 20 year old incidents, I would agree with them as well (Impeach4).

Please Do Not Feed The Trolls. Thank you (Impeach5).

Actually [Impeach4] was more of a "troll" than the post he responded to in that it was full of GOP party line BS as opposed to the facts (Impeach6).

So, that first post can slam Bush with democratic prop/opinions, but when someone posts something that's NOT that viewpoint it's a "troll" (Impeach7)?

Bush is fairly slammed for hiding his DUI conviction and his cocaine habit. It's fair game IMO -- a politician should admit to any illegal drug usage even "youthful indiscretions" because the public needs to decide if the politician in question was simply sampling or is a ticking time bomb (Bob Packwood, Wilbur Mills etc....). Who's to say that when China decides to nuke Taiwan because Bush shot his mouth off today, that Bush won't have a meltdown and find a bottle of scotch? Because Bush has refused to tell us, all we are left to do is wonder and think the worst because he won't fess up (Impeach8).

Refusing to talk about something isn't 'hiding' it. He acknowledged there were mistakes in his past and chose to not get into them. The public needs to decide if he's a walking time bomb because of drug/alcohol incidents from 20+ years ago??? No. they need to decide if he's a walking time bomb from

CURRENT/RECENT drug/alcohol abuse. I'm not saying I don't believe Clinton's I didn't inhale comment. I just was stating that had he responded similarly to Bush's chosen response, I would also have respected that out of him (more stating that I would hold both parties to the same standard). I did not mean to imply that Clinton's statements were wrong or lies or anything. They each chose a different method of responding to dug up old non-issues (Impeach9).

This particular thread continued for almost a month in the Spring of 2001, and ranged across a number of other topics (changing titles at least six times), but the opening here is illustrative of at least four issues I wish to raise in this project.

First, the reader will notice the reference to “trolls” in Impeach5-7.¹⁴⁵ As with other common concepts related to online forums, the notion of what a troll is or what (detrimental) effects trolls can have on group discussion is not entirely clear on alt.tv.the-west-wing. Impeach6 compares 1 and 4, arguing the latter was “full of GOP partyline BS as opposed to the facts.” Impeach7 rhetorically asks about the efficacy of a term that would appear to quash debate. Unanswered, this comment can be read as an unsettled question for the entire group: to what extent are group members willing to tolerate dissent and debate? In the example above, while Impeach5 seeks to cut off more incendiary discourse, others seem to find the comment at least tolerable if not appropriate. Quite simply, compared to other groups of *West Wing* viewers, this newsgroup community accepts quite a bit of dissent.

Second, in the nine posts above, we can see a particular way *The West Wing* operates within the group as a site from which to draw material for political discussion in the abstract and, more importantly, with reference to the concrete particulars of actual politics in the United States. When Impeach2 suggests “I'm sure they could find some high crime or

¹⁴⁵ I wish to save a more thorough discussion of “trolls” and “trolling” for the next chapter by way of bringing together some of the issues I have been analyzing through the dissertation and suggesting some potential directions for further research. Briefly, though, “trolling” can be considered “The practice of trying to lure other Internet users into sending responses.”

misdemeanor in a Prez who runs for office without revealing a serious physical illness,” readers recognize an awareness of the general rules for impeachment and what they might be likely to entail. Then, when Impeach3 mobilizes the analogy between Bartlet and Bush, it opens the opportunity for others to accept or reject it. In Impeach4-9, acceptance necessitates attention to the specific historical context in which average citizens experienced and *understood* challenges to President Bush’s ethical choices. The program’s text mediates those experiences in the form of a serial narrative. For newsgroup participants, the fact of the series’ particularity in the form of narrative arcs and dimensions of character encoded in these representations serves as a starting point for the practical deliberations that follow.

Third, we can see how posts in this group are addressed to specific others. While this element in itself is not unique to this group or even the medium of the internet, it works in particular ways here. Like a private conversation, often threads in alt.tv.the-west-wing have a back-and-forth quality to them: they are interactive. For example, Impeach1-6 correspond to six different screen names, but 6-9 are a dialogue between just two. Like a public face-to-face forum, these dialogues are also readable by anyone with internet access and have a one-to-many quality as well. Taken together with the nature of the political issues often under discussion, group participants are less likely to enjoy the same kind of insularity at work (and actively worked on) in some groups.¹⁴⁶ This willingness to respond—to reply, to renege, to rebut—keeps all discussions (or threads) potentially open in a way that inherently emphasizes the group over the individual. This tendency arguably dampens the effects of more individualistically oriented impulses like the cynicism of journalists.

¹⁴⁶ See Sunstein’s *Republic.com* for a discussion of the fragmentation the internet often promotes (especially 97-98).

Finally, these posts hint at a process of argument and assessment that is particularly developed on this newsgroup: namely, a process of judgment or practical reason. In the posts above, the notion that President Bush is “a real-world President who for decades concealed a DUI conviction, refused to discuss his coke habit, and basically makes Gilligan look like Bill Nye the Science Guy” prompts a series of experience-based judgments that are open to reworking and contestation by other group participants. Impeach4 accepts the facts of the president’s lack of elaboration but conceives of his statements not as concealment but as refusal: “Bush has never denied his problems with alcohol &/or drugs. He has just very plainly stated that he made mistakes in his past and will not discuss them.” After the failed attempt to silence the author by labeling the post a “troll,” Impeach8 shifts to a hypothetical argument as another attempt to make the case for concealment on the grounds that it is in the public interest. In the final post above, “refusing to talk about something isn’t ‘hiding’ it” works as a kind of enthymematic common sense to make a categorical distinction between concealment and refusal and, at the same time, to present the president’s actions as entirely appropriate for a public figure. Far from showing signs of feeling marginalized or hurt, the final lines of Impeach9 (“I did not mean to imply that Clinton's statements were wrong or lies or anything. They each chose a different method of responding to dug up old non-issues.”) indicate the posture taken by the implied author is not one of dogged disagreement as the earlier troll label would indicate, but instead represents a willingness to come to a situated compromise and produce a stronger position for all readers on the issue of Presidential disclosure.

These kinds of situated responses require what Beiner has called political judgment (i.e., the process of determining whether a “policy is just, or necessary, or advisable under

certain circumstances,” 6). Recognizing this is important to understanding the nature of the alt.tv.the-west-wing community, but it is equally important to recognize the way judgments about the aesthetic (art and entertainment) flow readily into and through these political judgments. Group participants have quite consciously allowed this intermingling, as the texts of many early discussions on the efficacy of the original charter indicate.¹⁴⁷

Put simply, liking *The West Wing* keeps viewers coming back to the group. That the show represents a fictional political drama has encouraged a willingness to maintain a space for debate and discussion among participants often contrary on political matters. However, group members appear to resist the urge to close off debate, unlike producers, who promote univocal reception, or journalists, who raise questions but rarely offer answers. Fans activate those questions and offer their own answers, which are often vigorously scrutinized. Part of the reason for this is due to the nature of online communities, especially those organized as specific fan communities around a media text like a television show. The kinds of responses and attitudes that typify fan discourse are in play in alt.tv.the-west-wing, but here those approaches to community are mingled with attitudes common to communities that discuss contemporary politics. In the special structure of this newsgroup, television and politics have been allowed to interact in ways often similar to the ways producers make them to mingle in the text itself. However, the aesthetic and political judgments of newsgroup participants, held up to public scrutiny through the nature of online forums, engage something more robust. Through regular attendance to the ways these two more commonly separate kinds of judgment interact in the forum, a particular kind of fan citizenship that draws on the strengths of both fandom and citizenship arises.

¹⁴⁷ When a newsgroup is created, it must be chartered and submitted to a Usenet oversight group. In alt.tv.the-west-wing's charter, the express purpose is to allow fans of the show a group within which to discuss the show and politics.

Mingling, Defusing, Reflecting: alt.tv.the-west-wing's Community

Each of the three trends I have discussed in the chapter thus far—the role of fellowship in the tolerance of dissent and a sense of play, the role of practical knowledge in the construction of situated experts, and the mingling of aesthetic and political judgment—work as resources for group participants. They are rarely all demonstrably present in a given post or thread, but they articulate with one another in a variety of combinations as needed in the contextual interactions of group participants to address specific moments in the evolution of the forum. One effect they have in common, however, is to dampen the kind of opportunistic or cynical positions we have seen among producers and journalists. Through the production of a kind of communal elasticity, individual participants' language may threaten disengagement, but the practices I describe above tend to pull them back to the discussion, discouraging disengagement. Producers and journalists tend to enact their roles in ways that are anti-group and pro-individual: producers in their push toward specialized consumption through promotion of aspects of quality, and journalists with their fatalistic stance and tendency to disengage from others and their values.

By contrast, discussions on the newsgroup are necessarily interactive and dynamic: participation requires engagement and some degree of preference for the group over the individual. At some level, the only thing that sustains the group is the active participation of its members. One can even lurk for long stretches of time without participation, but the moment she posts, she is part of the group and responsible for the responses she receives.¹⁴⁸ As such, participants consistently re-engage with the community, their fellow participants, and their attitudes, beliefs and values, at least about the series, but often about plenty of other

¹⁴⁸ This is probably one reason “trolls” are so despised on the web, because they often do not engage group members via response to their initial challenges. As I have briefly described, alt.tv.the-west-wing has its own kind of semi-troll, one who *does* stick around to debate. More on this in the final chapter.

topics and concerns. With journalists, we can always read their cynicism as an outgrowth of their professional responsibilities: no column, no job. But online, even cynicism must be understood in the context of a participant's constant return to the group in the form of new posts and new comments.

In addition, fan communities have never been interested in commercial gain as much as sharing the object of their fandom.¹⁴⁹ To some extent, there may also be evidence to suggest a relative lack of cynicism, at least as it refers to the texts for which groups are dedicated fans. The very nature of being a fan is one of engagement and belief, and as such is contrary to the attitudes upon which cynicism is typically based.¹⁵⁰

However, many of the journalists in the previous chapter were also what Chaloupka would probably call "believers" when it comes to *The West Wing*, and yet many also wrote cynically about the series. The difference between journalists and online fans is that when the former begin to draw connections between the series and actual politics, their writing inevitably turns cynical in tone. Online, the story is often different. For alt.tv.the-west-wing participants, the interactive and dynamic nature of their online community, together with their heavy use of situated political judgments, dampens the consuming effects of cynicism evident among journalists.

Participants in the newsgroup make judgments on both aesthetic and political matters drawn from a wide assortment of sources of knowledge, including the arguments of other participants. Much of the discussion among forum participants is similar to other online discussion: begun by an initiating post, readers of the forum read through new posts and

¹⁴⁹ Jenkins and Amesley have both discussed early requests for VCR tape recordings of episodes advertised through zines and conventions. Much of this circulation, as they note, was conducted under a rudimentary barter system or even simply given away free of charge. The motivation in either case was not financial gain but a larger community of fans.

¹⁵⁰ See Chaloupka, Chapter 2.

respond to any they wish. The original poster may respond to some or all of these responses, and on it goes until discussants choose to end. Sometimes, these discussions take the predictable form of a “flame war,” a term popularized online, which refers to a discussion in an online forum that devolves into predominantly ad hominem attacks and is without grounding in argument. Examples of such behavior are arguably as common on alt.tv.the-west-wing as on any other newsgroup.

However, often newsgroup participants act in markedly different ways as well. Instead of stubbornly repeating their own point of view, most participants offer their experience and knowledge in solving a problem or query posed by another group member. These participants activate their status as community experts and employ their personal judgment in the service of getting community work done. This activation indicates the crucial roles practical knowledge, interpretation, and *phronesis* play in the broader contemporary culture in which newsgroup participants circulate.

Viewers of *The West Wing* recognize the frameworks of “legibility” (Scott 2-3) inherent in the constructive and constitutive practices of the show’s producers: they attend to the constructions of “quality television” and “realism” encoded in the text and frequently articulate them with their own experience. Their judgment of the situations presented on the show and by their fellow participants is far from imperial. Instead, they reflect the character of practical knowledge, and in so doing activate and recuperate the practical knowledge necessary to solve the problem at hand.¹⁵¹ The participants of the newsgroup as a community attempt to deal with questions posed to them as problems to be solved rather than facts to be

¹⁵¹ Scott’s *Seeing Like a State* is in some ways a primer on the importance of *metis* (practical knowledge) for the well-oiled operation of daily life. “*Metis* is most applicable to broadly similar but never precisely identical situations requiring a quick and practiced adaptation” (316). Those who practice *metis* are not concerned with adding their knowledge to some larger pool available to all; instead, they wish to “solve the concrete problems they face” (324). See also Hariman, *Prudence*, 293-4.

incorporated within a widening body of empirical knowledge. In this process, viewers interpret their own experience of both the series in particular and culture more generally, constantly working to align those interpretations with a conception of culture with which they can identify.

Below, I work through two extended examples of discussions from alt.tv.the-west-wing in order to elaborate on the specific ways these resources have been combined. In doing so, I begin to elaborate on the efficacy of this more robust incarnation of the fan citizen.

First Example: Supreme Court Questions

In this first example, we can see the ways practical knowledge offered by group members is earnestly and openly sought, then pored over by others who engage the central question with tentative but firm responses offered for all to consider and upon which to make their own judgments. A viewer poses a question to the group about the nature of United States Supreme Court procedure. The viewer does not entirely understand the nature of the reference to the Supreme Court encountered in that week's episode, and therefore seeks knowledge in the newsgroup. The fact that the answers to this question lead respondents to a discussion of practical versus logical knowledge is a particularly telling example of the ways practical knowledge promotes the development of community on *The West Wing* newsgroup. The thread begins with a series of questions about jurisprudence:

I know there's a lot of people knowledgable [sic] about the government in general here and thought someone might be able to answer a few questions. On "First Monday" they've made a point of saying when a case is heard before them only the lawyers testify or address the court. Why is this? Is it for the sake of expediency? Is it so that the decision, at least on this level will be predicated more on the law than on emotions that witnesses or what not might

bring into play? Would emotional responses even be a real concern with Supreme Court Judges (SCQuestion1)?¹⁵²

Significant in this post is the echo of Gadamer's suggestion that the practice of jurisprudence is an exemplar for a particular kind of hermeneutics: "...legal erudition characteristic of the jurist is with good reason called jurisprudence, which means sagacity in legal affairs. The very word itself recalls the heritage of practical philosophy that considered *prudentia* the highest virtue of practical rationality" (127).

Scott and Gadamer's highly commensurate perspectives on the role of practical wisdom ("*metis*" for one and "hermeneutics" for the other) show us what this newsgroup participant appears to be seeking is not a definition or delineation of Supreme Court rules and procedures, but a situated explanation of other group members' understanding of the reasons for such procedures. The newsgroup provides a community that offers the kind of situated knowledge the viewer seeks. The outcome suggested by this poster's questions is a way to *approach* factual knowledge about the Supreme Court—to *understand* and *interpret* that knowledge within a cultural framework (in this case, contemporary U.S. politics).¹⁵³ The poster also seeks factual knowledge, but this first post, and more importantly, responses to it, constitute an open dialogue about the nature of judicial practice that both explicitly refers to the importance of practical knowledge and implicitly enacts it. Instead of working as a closed package of data to be integrated into a rigidly codified framework, the discussion operates as an open-ended dynamic that resists the urge to simplify. The structure of the

¹⁵² SCQuestion posts are referenced in Works Cited under "Supreme Court Question," alt.tv.the-west-wing.

¹⁵³ If we were to ask this poster whether this was his or her intent, the answer might not be an affirmative. But as the following analysis reveals, at least some of the responses have been crafted in a way that suggests their authors have interpreted the opening questions this way. The polysemic (or at least polyvalent—see Condit, "The Limits of Polysemy") nature of texts allows for this kind of fluidity of interpretation, but within the context of other responses and the presumption that respondents are in fact interacting with those with whom they exchange posts, it is reasonable to expect at some point, the conversation at least *became* about providing these kinds of answers.

thread is in theory only limited by the post/response dyad and the amount of memory available on the servers that store them: the conversation could theoretically go on forever, without any closure.

Comprising about 16 individual posts in an open debate among a handful of newsgroup participants, the nature of the particular discussion this first post highlights the way the conception of community enacted by these participants is underscored by the kind of practical knowledge and judgment Scott and Gadamer argue is always in play. Scott suggests, “*metis* represents a wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment” (313). This condition is both explicitly discussed and intuitively enacted in the course of the development of this particular thread.

The path of responses to this apparently innocent post traces first through a series of clarifications. In the second post, the claim is made that “Witnesses testify to the facts” in court cases, and as such are not needed in the Supreme Court because “decisions related to the facts of the case have already been made” (SCQuestion2). The next response looks to clarify this clarification, offering that Supreme Court cases are mostly on appeal, and as such “are made on the basis of the law as applied to the facts” (SCQuestion3). In these early iterations of the conversation, answers appear in the relatively recognizable form of direct answers to a direct question: respondents appear to accept the question for the most part at face value, simplifying their answers so that they are more legible as responses to the question posed.

However, the tone of the thread shifts slightly when a viewer suggests the Supreme Court has certain duties from which it cannot deviate: “The SCOTUS [Supreme Court of the

United States] members are required to follow the Constitution and all other Constitutional laws, they can't just make shit up for personal reasons except by violating their oath of office” (SCQuestion6). This response appears to be in reference not only to the clarifications noted above, but also to the implication in the original post that emotion might figure in the decisions of Supreme Court Justices. The inclusion of “make shit up” here should not be dismissed: the muted but growing hostility this post expresses is a signpost for the gathering sense of rupture among community members. At least on this question, what had perhaps been an assumed congruity among group member beliefs instead has been shown to be contested. This comment is a sign that a cynical withdrawal from the debate could be forthcoming.

Surely, questions about the responsibilities of the Supreme Court have been raised numerous times in legal circles—as is clearly warranted by the gravity of such a concern—and may or may not have been definitively answered more or less persuasively in those instances. However, the newsgroup serves as a site for a different kind of discourse, similar but significantly distinct from that professional realm. None of the respondents identify themselves as professional legal scholars, lawyers, or judges; on the contrary, one post highlights that the author is *not* a lawyer. While there may very well be legal scholars who post in the forum, and some participants may even defer to their opinion on specifically legal matters such as this one, the group nevertheless chooses to solve answers to problems based upon community discussion, debate, and consideration. These respondents appear to be non-professionals, ordinary citizens attempting to understand and interpret more deeply their government and the political culture in which they participate. This is a crucial and fundamental choice repeatedly opted for with the group. No answer will ever be fully

justified within the group until it has been vetted through open conflict and debate. Once it has been tested in that arena, an answer may become accepted, but not before. As in the discussion of the status of community members' knowledge above, no individual appears to be an expert on this topic, but *collectively*, their knowledge and experience can help to answer specific questions and solve specific problems.

The remainder of this sequence, admittedly only a small fragment of the entire range of responses to the original post, becomes more and more focused on the issue of the legal responsibility of the Supreme Court. In a now-increasing escalation of focus on the specific issue this particular sequence of the thread will consider, one post probes for a narrower understanding of the nature of the Supreme Court's role. Rather than "follow" the Constitution,

to be picky; they **interpret** the constitution. So they're required to follow it, **as they believe it should be followed**. Since that's their biggest job – to decide what the constitution actually means whenever there's a question about it" (SCQuestion7).

The question of interpretation "as they believe it should be followed" versus to "obey the INTENT of the law as meant by the people who wrote it" (SCQuestion8) becomes the crux of the issue in this thread. This last comment comes from the same author who asserts "'truth' should also be as solid [as facts], but far too many people think the word itself is a variable, so it's a more difficult case to use it as meaning a solid fact" (SCQuestion11). The group here maintains a level of decorum we might consider appropriate for a face-to-face debate: with the exception of the frustrated comment above, these posts circle in on a solution to the question of how to understand the Supreme Court's role without resorting to flames or other cynical tactics.

The confident epistemological statement in SCQuestion11, combined with a claim about the frequency of the Supreme Court's consideration of "original intent," prompts a philosophical expression of a rhetorical sensibility on the part of another participant:

The debate about the proper theory of jurisprudence has been going on forever. Some would say "original intent." Others would say "original understanding," which makes a lot more sense than original intent. Others would say "plain meaning"...There is no one "right answer," no matter how much ideologues on each side want to insist that theirs is correct. There are answers that are more or less logical, and more or less practical (SCQuestion14).

Responses in the discussion have shifted focus from answering a specific question to understanding answers to that question within a more general framework. In this way, the discussion is always centered and focused on a concrete and specific problem to be solved, applying general rules of thumb as tools for producing solutions.

Gadamer and Scott would likely find this last post the most compelling case for an understanding of the Supreme Court. The role of understanding, praxis, and judgment in this description of the Court's duties, aligned against the role of intent, rightness, and logic, highlights and affirms the situated nature of jurisprudence that has allowed it to remain a significant and powerful tool of social coherence for centuries. As Scott notes, "Every general knowledge that is actually applied...requires some imaginative translation" (318). That translation from abstract generalities (gleaned through testing, critique, and debate over time) to specific applications in real-life situations is going on constantly among these newsgroup participants.

What is ultimately important to recognize in this discussion of the ways the newsgroup community members employ judgment is that it allows answers to specific, bounded problems, but at the same time contributes to an ongoing, ever expanding body of

evidence and argument that feeds the production of generalities. This is a crucial element for understanding how complicated public discourse about abstract concepts like “television,” “quality,” “realism,” and “politics” become articulated, mobilized, and then concretized in the sediment of the day-to-day discussions and debates of the newsgroup community. Over time, small discussions like these produce situated answers held together by individual judgments as to their validity. Those answers form the practical knowledge of the group. In this case, that knowledge is a *mélange* of details about both the series and about politics more broadly. Anxieties about the boundary between politics and fantasy are raised and debated when a fan wants to know how a specific representation of the Supreme Court in an episode can be understood in light of the actual Supreme Court. Each participant must adjudicate the answers provided by respondents for herself. Over time, those answers that receive the least criticism from other group members come to stand as representative of the knowledge of the group itself.

This process of open criticism and vetting of positions and arguments is also a way to understand how consistent interaction among members of a group can help to stave off a tendency toward cynicism. It is harder (though certainly not impossible) to assume the worst and remain distant and disengaged from your community when you have an easily accessible forum within which to voice your opinions and in which you are encouraged by others to do so. When talk does turn to extended political discussion and debate, remaining open to other points of view and trying to understand them becomes a harder prospect to reject.

All of this occurs in the case of alt.tv.the-west-wing because of the way the forum’s participants have actively produced a place within which aesthetic and political judgments are consistently put forth and debated, and dissent within the group about the particular

character of those judgments is tolerated and protected. The knowledge produced in this kind of discussion is practical, situated between the expert and the ordinary. In the next example, humor and play operate together with mingling judgment and the search for situated knowledge as a unifying and coping strategy to deal with rupture and trauma. While the traces are subtle, they indicate the power of aesthetic and political imagination to inform one another.

Second Example: "The West Wing"'s Response To 9/11, Viewers' Responses To "The West Wing"

During the weeks immediately following September 11th, 2001, public response to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon was diverse and wide-spread. For participants of alt.tv.the-west-wing, much of it concerned the episode, "Isaac and Ishmael." As the first organized response from the scripted television community—airing on October 3rd just over three weeks after the attacks—the episode was crafted explicitly to address them:

NBC will postpone next week's planned premiere of "The West Wing" to allow producers to shoot a special episode of the White House drama that deals with "some of the questions and issues currently facing the world." "West Wing" creator Aaron Sorkin penned the terrorism-themed episode, "Isaac and Ishmael," during the past few days in response to the Sept. 11 attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. "Aaron is a brilliant writer who has something he wants to say," said Jeff Zucker, NBC Entertainment president. "We have great faith in his abilities to interpret last week's events in a manner that will make this an important hour of television."¹⁵⁴

"We didn't feel comfortable going back to our fictional White House without taking a moment," executive producer John Wells told *Daily Variety*. "Hopefully, we can say something that's useful and not in any way appear like we're trying to exploit the tragic events ... You can't pretend this didn't

¹⁵⁴ This statement was taken from a post to the newsgroup on September 22, 2001, quoting an article from the *Hollywood Reporter* front page.

occur."¹⁵⁵

Producers “got the word out” about how the show ought to be interpreted by viewers: as “something that’s useful,” “an important hour of television.” Ever mindful of shaping reception of the series in the minds of the public, producers seemed to indicate that if *The West Wing* was to respond to September 11th, it ought to be interpreted as a quality response.

Journalists wondered whether the timing was appropriate. Some of their headlines include, “‘West Wing’ On Alert Show Responds to Real-Life Crisis, But Is America Ready?” (Aucoin C1) and “West Wing Takes Bold Step With Attack-Related Episode” (Elber). One journalist titled his article about the episode, “Whither Reality TV?” linking “Isaac and Ishmael” to a philosophical question about whether any representations of actual events would feel realistic after watching those planes smash into the towers on live television. As with producers, previously common topics among journalists emerged here as well, once again raising questions about the validity of television as a medium.

The episode was written as a stand-alone narrative that would not integrate with the ongoing storyline of the series. What *The West Wing*’s producers created was an oblique response to and commentary on the attacks and their immediate aftermath. In response, amidst the general fear and uncertainty of that historical moment, group members and *West Wing* fans attempted to come to terms with the content of the episode and the decision to air it so soon after September 11th.

As an extended example of this kind of response, consider the variety of factors at work in some of the individual responses to a particularly condemnatory article in the *New York Post*. As with any fan community, attacks on the object of the group’s focus are never met

¹⁵⁵ This excerpt was taken from another post to the group on September 25, 2001, quoting an article in *Daily Variety*.

with kind words. However, the unique context within which “Isaac and Ishmael” was aired was a crucial element of the group’s collective response. In the original article, the author condemns the episode for its preachiness: “The liberal Democrats of ‘The West Wing’ took on terrorism last night - and did little but make pompous speeches.”¹⁵⁶ Rather than immediately come to the series’ defense, the fan citizens of alt.tv.the-west-wing seek to locate the episode within their own aesthetic and political webs of meaning, and their responses are far from gushing:

I do have to say I was a bit disappointed in some regards (Terror1).¹⁵⁷

I hesitate to say it, because this group seems to be disintegrating [sic] to the point that negative opinions of this episode aren't tolerated, but Sorkin didn't do his job on this one. The episode was just plain boring. TWW's strength is that it can make it's point while providing fast paced, edge of seat, I can't believe it's over already drama. There was no drama here.... I think he missed a good chance to spread the views that were espoused, because all but the most fanatical TWW supporters were asleep or in the kitchen doing dishes before it was over (Terror2).

Here fans of the series hold back from unqualified praise of this episode’s quality. They are “disappointed” and “bored.” The larger debate over this episode had already begun, and these were only two of the variety of group participants for whom the episode was subpar compared to the previous two seasons.¹⁵⁸ Aesthetically, then, many group participants critiqued the episode rather harshly by the previous standards of the group.

Another element of these two comments, though, is the extent to which they qualify their qualifications of the episodes’ quality. They note that it was not completely but only “a bit” disappointing, and that they “hesitate to say” that the producers did not do their jobs.

¹⁵⁶ This excerpt is from the article by Buckman that begins the Terror thread.

¹⁵⁷ “Terror” posts are referenced in Works Cited under “West Wing Wimps Out on Terror,” alt.tv.the-west-wing.

¹⁵⁸ Other notable threads on this episode include “Isaac and Ishmael,” “Isaac and Ishmael: raw gut first impressions,” and “Random Thoughts on ‘Isaac and Ishmael.’”

Such qualification is one way to dampen the sometimes harsh tone printed dialogue can take on in its lack of other interpersonal cues such as vocal inflection and body language. (Though these qualifiers can also be used cynically, in the context of the full comments above they seem to be working as softeners.) In the next response, the author qualifies a dissenting judgment of the episode's quality:

Now, that's just, imho, not fair. Not the part about saying the episode was boring-- about saying that this group doesn't tolerate negative opinions about the show. I certainly don't feel that way. I'll concede I don't agree with you, I don't think it was boring. But as for [the kitchen comment]... That implies that if I liked this episode, I must just be a fanatical TWW supporter with no ability to judge, doesn't it? That's unfair too (Terror3).

As with the Supreme Court example, here again we see explicit mobilization of experiential knowledge in the use of qualifiers: “imho” stands for “in my humble opinion,” a common abbreviated qualifier in online forums. By qualifying the post, the author subtly reminds the reader the response is offered in a situated context. The use of this qualifier anywhere on the internet is a way to acknowledge one's opinion may not achieve the status of expert knowledge among readers, but that the author feels the comment is worth circulating publicly nonetheless. One's opinion should be “humble” because one cannot assert with certainty its validity. At the same time, offering one's qualified opinion in this way creates a space within which one's reader can attend to the claims and evidence with the knowledge that it is offered humbly, but offered nonetheless. Thus, this post is an invitation to attend to the argument within a contingent context. The reader is being asked to recognize the response as a judgment call.

Next in the thread is something of an anomaly, both within alt.tv.the-west-wing specifically and among online forums in general: a 1200 word, enumerated explanation of the elements of the episode the author disliked accompanied by relatively in-depth analysis.

Some points relate to the particular show, some relate to *The West Wing*'s characters and storylines, and others relate to aspects of "Isaac and Ishmael" that do not seem realistic to the author. It is notable here that the arrangement of the post is mostly circumscribed by common structures of rational legibility: each claim is enumerated and supported by specific evidence from the text of the show; when the text itself is in question, outside evidence from other primary and secondary sources is provided to make the point. Unlike the Supreme Court Question above, or, for that matter, the majority of the rest of the responses in this online community, the author has constructed a response that asks readers to identify with the post as a serious, erudite refutation of the episode's aesthetic and political value.

And yet, this legibility is suffused with aspects of practical knowledge as well. Arguments drawn from experience rather than expert or official testimony are in play here. The post highlights them explicitly. For example: "At no other time, *watching all the past two years of TWW*, have I been so **aware** of manipulative scripting"; "Out of character, *it seemed to me*" (emphasis added). The author places personal experience in front of the public eye alongside other kinds of evidence used to make this argument. Personal experience and extra-ordinary knowledge—as a fan and as a citizen—are mobilized as yet another aspect of the argument.

In addition, these reactions to the episode are tied up with feelings about the political uncertainty that was such a palpable feature of the national zeitgeist during early October of 2001. Here the author specifically ties that uncertainty to aesthetic judgments of the episode's quality:

I think what Sorkin wanted to do was quite courageous...however, I think he didn't pull it off. I felt manipulated and frustrated...and **patronized**. The episode felt contrived and I hated that. I hung in to the bitter end, and ended up feeling as if I'd wasted an hour (Terror5).

Here, the episode failed in part because it did not negotiate the relevant tensions between fiction and fact effectively handled in other episodes of the show: the episode was “contrived,” viewing time was “wasted,” and perhaps the most egregious affront, the author felt “patronized.” For an audience accustomed to identifying with the series as its affluent, educated, elite quality television demographic, patronizing discourse can seem an especially low blow. Perhaps more importantly in the current discussion, feelings of being patronized may also stem from forum participants’ notion of themselves as engaged citizens who do not need a concise, televisual civics lesson literally pitched at high school students to help them understand the implications of the September 11th attacks. To an audience of individuals who consume the series as both fans and citizens, any sense of being talked down to in an episode can feel doubly hurtful.

Responses to this passionate and well-structured statement were also rife with references to practical knowledge, both in support of and against the episode’s apparent messages. In response to the claim that “as I recall, in the WTC horror, it was at least 24 hours before Islamics were perhaps being targetted [sic] as being responsible” (Terror7), one group member writes:

I heard [Islamic responsibility] as a supposition before the towers even fell, and before the end of the day, on the news channels I was watching in any case, Osama bin Laden’s name was in the air. I don’t know if that negates any point you made about the show, *but that’s what my experience was* (Terror9, emphasis added).

Another important element of these deliberations is the fact that, even as the posts seem to be working as ways to interpret and understand the incomprehensible nature of the 9/11 attacks, they are also working to shore up the same questions about realism and quality we have been discussing in other talk about *The West Wing*. Anxieties about realism have

been infused throughout the preceding paragraphs (e.g., not liking the show because it was not convincing or individuals were “out of character”) and at some level the predominant character of much of the disdain for the episode is its lack of realism.

But quality and its presumed ties to certain audiences or kinds of viewers is also explicitly marked in this thread:

I didn’t think I’d been promised “cutting edge” TV, just an episode devoted to addressing terrorism and our reactions to it. I think there are a lot of people out there less informed than we think, and sometimes less informed than they want to admit (Terror9).

If that was true, I’d agree. But the really uninformed people wouldn’t be watching TWW, IMO, they’d be watching tag-team wrestling or Who Wants to be a Millionaire”. Unfortunately (Terror12).

Unfortunately, you are most probably right (Terror13).

Here, two group participants reassure themselves about their status as members of the elite, quality audience. In this case, their dual use of “unfortunately” works almost as a mantra: “too bad for them (but good for us, the informed ones”). As such, it actively manages the imaginary boundary between “quality” and “ordinary” so many *West Wing* viewers are vested in maintaining.

At some level, these responses provide a sense that group participants are callous and selfish, as if the nation’s response to the attacks here takes a back seat to the quality of a television series’ episode. However, unlike journalists, who tend to presume the worst, one might imagine such responses to the episode’s aesthetic choices are heated precisely because the nation’s response to the attacks holds such value. Within the context of *The West Wing* as the highest quality drama on television, a context with which alt.tv.the-west-wing participants have been shown to align themselves, fans inevitably ask, “if *The West Wing* cannot craft a compelling response, then who can?” In contrast to other groups of *West Wing*

viewers, online fans take the series as a starting point from which can emerge resources for aesthetic and political judgment. When the series is lacking in their eyes, it makes it that much harder to make effective judgments.

This articulation of aesthetics, politics, and public uncertainty about the attacks becomes a salient feature of the way humor and play are mobilized in this thread. One might expect posts in the weeks immediately following the September 11th attacks to be somber, confused, or angry. Then again, one might see such an expectation as an unnecessarily broad generalization, since so many of us were not directly affected by the attacks in the short term. In fact, neither of these characterizations would accurately reflect posts on alt.tv.the-west-wing. Instead, responses on the newsgroup were colored by a wide variety of tones and moods. Even within this one thread, we find a number of ways group participants use playful commentary alternately to open new avenues of discussion or take a detour—a verbal break—from the topic at hand. For example:

Also, the sly flirty exchanges between Donna and Josh -- would they do that in front of 30 students, even under normal circumstances (Terror5)?

Bite your tongue! <g> Some of the folks around here don't see their exchanges as flirty at all, some do. That's, as the X-Files proved a long time ago, somewhat in the eye of the beholder (Terror7).

Josh's sidewise grin ... sorry -- Josh gives me a pain in the butt. His delivery makes me want to smack him. I'm repeating myself, apologies (Terror5).

Does Josh regularly give you a pain in the butt? Seriously, as a valid question-- I'm just saying, there was a lot of Josh in this episode, and if he's a character you generally don't enjoy, the entire ep would be bound to displease you. It's like if I watched an entire episode of ER focusing on Cleo-- I'd be sure to dislike it (Terror7).

This mercurial banter keeps the discussion open to new directions of inquiry. The significance of the enumerated list of problems with the episode invites a flurry of commentary on the subject, and takes the entire thread in a variety of directions. However,

the quips in the response above steer part of the discussion away from the episode itself, back into more familiar commentary about Josh and Donna's potential relationship.¹⁵⁹

Play can also encourage reconnection with established topics within the forum. Without overtly saying so, the joking references to Josh and Donna here invite readers to tie this thread to others elsewhere within the forum. Humor becomes a way to re-establish common ground between parties who may disagree. The bonds of fellowship are strengthened subtly and the dissenting stance taken in the first post is managed obliquely.

For example, in this thread of 58 individual posts, nearly a third of them together constitute an extended, comical riff on the kinds of high-heel shoes worn (or not) by Abby Bartlet (played by Stockard Channing). It begins as a response to a comment about Channing's acting ability:

If Stockard Channing is going to be a regular (God help us), wardrobe had better find her some new shoes to wear. So far they make her look like a cheap hooker (Terror27).

Can't say as I even noticed her shoes, but am wondering how shoes can possibly make a person look like a hooker of *any* ilk. Pretty shoes are pretty shoes. They know no occupational boundaries (Terror28).

The next 16 posts elaborate upon what the proper name of such footwear is/should be, whether it is appropriate for a First Lady to wear such gear, and practical filmmaking reasons for such wardrobe choices (i.e., that perhaps Channing is too short to stand shoulder to shoulder with other actors on the show without podiatric aids). This discussion has only a brief connection to the thread's topic (responses to the Buckman article).

Given this, it works as a kind of detour away from the serious and somber tone of the rest of the discussion. Of the twelve unique usernames in the shoes discussion, only four are

¹⁵⁹ An oft-discussed topic on the newsgroup; the reference to *The X-Files* is to another oft-discussed potential relationship in that series.

not also the authors of at least one other post in the rest of the thread, indicating this shoe-thread is not an eddy produced by a small minority of the thread's participants. Rather than a conversation begun by those disinterested in the more weighty aspects of the thread, the shoe topic provides an outlet for those otherwise engaged in addressing the problems raised in the long missive. As such, humor and play serve as both creative engines—raising novel connections that can turn into full-fledged discussions of their own—and as pressure valves—siphoning off some of the heat of a given discussion to keep tempers from flaring to the point of combustion, igniting a flame war. Humor and play become intertwined with other techniques of group interaction on alt.tv.the-west-wing as tools to manage the variety of tensions I have discussed above, but most importantly, they discourage the cynical disengagement I have shown can quickly become debilitating for some viewers. Instead of promoting or sustaining such tones, humor and play allow viewers the opportunity to veer away from a topic or open up new vistas for exploration at precisely the moment when the lack of a beneficial solution to a thorny problem or deep-rooted anxiety threatens to prompt disengagement with the issue. Instead of throwing up one's hands while firing out a sarcastic quip, a playful tone redirects those anxieties along new avenues of discussion.

Conclusion

Online forum participants sometimes get a bad rap in contemporary culture. The tendency to focus on topics of specific self-interest to the viewer (having a baby, a single television program, college football, do-it-yourself computer building, etc.) can sometimes concurrently encourage the kind of fragmentation among social groups to which Sunstein points with dogged disdain. If these and Putnam's worries about the decline in social capital can be entertained, then we ought to pay much more serious attention to the practices of

community-building than we apparently do. Instead of breaking ourselves into smaller and smaller interest groups, we should be finding ways to encourage sharing ideas and experiences across a much broader spectrum of interests and backgrounds.

At some level, the anxieties of social critics like Putnam and Sunstein is nowhere more obvious than among television fans, whose online forums often actively discourage any kind of discussion that is not specifically about the show. In alt.tv.the-west-wing, there is certainly some of this kind of positioning of the value of the forum: as one of a few places in the world, virtual or actual, where a person deeply interested in talking about *The West Wing* can go to find others with similar interests. As such, what is deemed appropriate for this particular forum has been a recurrent subject of discussion for some purists.¹⁶⁰ As I have discussed above, the majority of the group seems at least to tolerate if not appreciate the ability of the group's ostensible specificity to drive a more open exploration of what individual participants find relevant or compatible with the nature of the community its participants have fostered.

That community has some specific features, some of which are common to many if not all online forums. Others arise out of the specific nature of the television series and historical circumstances around and within which the forum has been created. The need to maintain a vibrant and robust community centered around *The West Wing* as an object of passionate pursuit has encouraged opportunities for fellowship among group participants. This is especially salient for alt.tv.the-west-wing in their implementation of humor and play

¹⁶⁰ See, for example, the thread entitled "On topic, believe it or not." There, some long-time and newbie participants discuss the merits of policing the group in various ways to encourage discussion that is directly related to the series and resist that which is not. The offending posts in question seem to be those that are explicitly about U.S. politics without reference to *The West Wing*. It is at these points in the forum that the question of the value of alt.tv.the-west-wing is debated and contested. However, in the six-year history of the forum, no individual or interest group has managed to eliminate or even curtail such cross-posting.

as modes of creative multivocality and tension management, and their high degree of tolerance of dissent among group members, especially when it comes to varying political viewpoints. If you can make a compelling case for your passion for the series, your thoughts and comments will be tolerated if not welcomed, despite any particular political ideology. Unlike many online forums, almost all of which foster some kind of encouragement of fellowship lest they falter and die out, alt.tv.the-west-wing's tolerance of dissent has furthered the kind of direct debate and open conflict we would consider fundamental to the maintenance of a democratic society.

Another key feature of many online fan forums is the promotion of a form of practical knowledge that stands somewhere between that of the "ordinary" and the "expert." Lacking access to the texts and bodies of knowledge that would promote more formal modes of expert knowledge, but participating in practices of identification with the series through the passion of fandom, online television fans tend to promote a situated, practical knowledge that comes from significant commitment of time and focused attention to the series. Fans of *The West Wing* are no different, and their very status as fans is tied to their ability to answer all manner of questions related to it. In this case, however, because of the broad-based nature of the forum itself, these participants find themselves attempting to assess many questions that range far beyond the specific text of the show, whether they be questions about political issues raised within a specific episode or are more explicitly "off-topic." Because this particular series represents politics, much of the knowledge circulated on the forum attempts to address political questions in a manner that is arguably unique among online forums.

This leads forum participants to a specific set of practices for which there is little evidence elsewhere among other online discussion groups, and that is the tendency on

alt.tv.the-west-wing to mingle aesthetic and political judgments in their pursuit of practical knowledge. Whether because of an inherent iconoclasm among the particular characters of this group's participants, or the specific nature of *The West Wing*'s text, or more likely an intertwining of both, these online fans regularly and deliberately bring their judgments of the series' aesthetic choices to bear on their assessments of its political value, and they bring their judgments of the series value as a political resource to bear on their assessments of its aesthetic quality. As fans of a series about U.S. politics, they identify the ways it exceeds, meets, or falls short of their expectations for representations of liberal democracy. As U.S. citizens, they identify the ways television can and cannot offer us stories about politics in which we can take pleasure.

These practices arise in order to manage conflicting pressures, in that newsgroup participants need the ability to make connections between experience and new texts to ease the anxieties that inevitably arise from the incommensurability of everyday life. In their attempts to untangle something of the intersection between contemporary U.S. politics and the series' representations of it, their social practices have allowed group participants to better prepare themselves for participation in civic life. While producers and journalists appear to seek a unified, modernist voice of authority, articulated as quality television, realism, or some other mode, online forum participants speak with much more pluralistic voices. These aspects do not eliminate the detriments of a cynical retreat from politics, but they stave it off by checking hopelessness with other desires. Group members return to engage one another again and again in debate because of their multivocal interests in both the specifics of the series (as fans) and its representation of U.S. politics (as citizens). Through the forum, participants enact a unique kind of public character I have called "fan citizenship."

The specific attitudes and values of fandom turn out to be remarkably well-suited for contemporary citizenship in that the passion and fervor with which a fan appreciates a television text motivates the reflection, debate, and engagement we expect of our citizens. Everyday life is by nature fractured, fluid, and incomplete, and citizens in our liberal democracy must make their individual political decisions while participating in all the other facets of contemporary life. One important mechanism for managing the fluidity in our everyday lives is deliberation through discussion and debate. A deliberative democracy is based upon the process of political judgment. Meanwhile, television fans have always found ways to participate with each other in deliberating over their interpretations of their favorite programs. The advent of the internet has allowed some significant shifts in the way such communities interact and grow. While viewers themselves are spread across a massive geographical area, some have found the internet to be a practical technology for allowing them to connect with other viewers and maintain the lines of communication, about *The West Wing*, but also about their ongoing interpretations of daily life. The fellowship such interaction promotes is both a cause and an effect of fandom itself. Fans constantly seek new insights about the show's production, narrative structure, characters, and meanings. This dynamic body of situated knowledge expands and adapts to the changes among community members. Group participants' fan citizenship becomes an aspect of their fractured, post-modern character that works across boundaries and allows them to articulate the varied discourses of television and politics.

Here we can again return to the weak and strong responses to critics of fragmentation and isolation such as Sunstein and Putnam. If we take their critiques to be accurate, we can look at participants in alt.tv.the-west-wing as having produced an array of social practices for

staving off the encroachment of otherwise society-wide problems of loss of general interest intermediaries and social capital. The forum works as a virtual site for the production of fellowship and as a resource for working through the practical knowledge and situated aesthetic and political judgments necessary to live in contemporary society.

On the other hand, if we use the practices employed on alt.tv.the-west-wing as evidence, we can argue that at least some groups have fragmented away from the larger society, but that such fragmentation is not necessarily a detriment to deliberative democracy (or, for that matter, effective aesthetic critique). Rather than to operate in some kind of echo chamber, in which each participant responds in a way that simply reinforces the pre-constituted beliefs of the others, alt.tv.the-west-wing participants bring a wide variety of experience, practical knowledge, and evidence to bear on the claims of their fellow participants. They do this at the very same time that they actively acknowledge their fandom for *The West Wing*, often to the exclusion of discussion of other television series. This suggests that at least some fans do not stop identifying as citizens the moment they begin talking about their favorite series. Further, while as a specific community alt.tv.the-west-wing seems to suggest that fandom needs to be more prominently connected to politics in order to achieve this effect, the responses of the participants of soc.history.what-if suggest this need not necessarily be the case.

Through their enactment of fan citizenship, we can also see one possible way out of the problematic discourse of cynicism in contemporary politics. Rather than to retreat into an isolated, distanced, uncaring enclave, group members on alt.tv.the-west-wing have shown signs of a willingness to remain politically aware and engaged, even in the face of direct, vehement challenges to political positions or ideological beliefs. This active stance

articulates powerfully in their case with a fan's desire to talk about *The West Wing* with other fans. They use the series as an occasion to help them to better understand their role as citizens within the polity. A fan's devotion is precisely the kind of engagement we would hope to encourage among our citizens. Though many characterizations of fandom have been of rabid, senseless devotees of a text, such representations are short-sighted. We can see in alt.tv.the-west-wing an enactment of a kind of fandom crucial for its participants in activating their own citizenship in ways life without their love of *The West Wing* would likely not have produced, or at least not produced in the same way. Their community encourages us to rethink some of the sky-is-falling claims of critics who see television, the internet, and virtual life as socially empty.

The claim here is not that these group members have organized into a political action group; nor do I mean to suggest that they petition their elected officials or mount letter-writing campaigns; nor further do I even suggest that they meet to discuss politics outside the context of *The West Wing*. They very well may do these things; future research may uncover such activities or it may not. What I do mean to suggest is that the process of discussing a television program online that represents an analog of the U.S. political process has in this case constituted a new sphere in which group participants can access a variety of arguments (perhaps like classical Greek "topics") and rehearse them with others who will readily challenge them. This, in turn, allows such participants to prepare themselves for more direct political activities in which they may or may not participate. Begun as fans of *The West Wing*, in creating and constantly enacting their particular version of community, participants identify themselves as citizens for democratic action. Compared to other groups of *West Wing* viewers discussed in this dissertation, alt.tv.the-west-wing newsgroup participants have

created a community in which judgment—both aesthetic and political—is practiced and displayed for other group participants. Their activity complicates our notions of “fan” and “citizen” in that they frequently and easily shift back and forth between the aesthetic and political judgments integral to our common understanding of each. When combined with a desire to seek practical knowledge and fellowship, these practices help to dampen the individualistic and cynical impulses seen among other groups and offer one small sign of hope for our political future.

Chapter 5

Community, Fandom, and Citizenship in Public Life

Viewers of *The West Wing* have participated in a public discourse centered around a television series that began before it even aired its first episode. Whether because of a strong identification with its representations, the particular political context within which the program aired, or a complex intermingling of the two, *The West Wing* has served as an opportunity for a variety of personal and professional roles to intermingle and engage one another. That engagement has created the opportunity to address a variety of issues and anxieties percolating among the U.S. public. While this engagement has taken place at a number of cultural sites, four are particularly representative: the representations of the program's text, journalistic interviews with the program's producers, journalists' reviews and criticism, and on-line fan forums. Peeling back the social and cultural layers at each site, each viewer community is both worried about similar issues and engaged in different approaches to addressing them.

The West Wing, like many popular culture texts, is at once an end, a source to be mined, and a point of departure, a place to begin. As an end, it is the culmination of all the work and efforts of its producers, as well as an ongoing response to the praise and criticisms of its viewers. As a beginning, journalists and fans use it as a resource for invention, discussion, and criticism. Producers, journalists, and fans at different levels of intensity allow the program to serve as an intentional resource for further labor, whether that work evolves into new episodes or a deeper understanding of television or politics. This project has outlined some of the specific ways *West Wing* viewers have developed individual readings of the series that have, in the aggregate, highlighted some important tensions at

work in their interpretations of U.S. society and popular culture. Each of the communities of viewers considered here use the series as a creative resource in a variety of ways, but the directions such uses take depend on the particular contexts of power, public roles, and available resources for knowledge and judgment. Out of each group's circumstances has emerged a specific approach to the management of fantasy and reality, entertainment and politics, and quality and the rest of television.

In Chapter 2, I addressed the ways the public discourse of the program's producers indicates they are motivated by the economic realities of the contemporary broadcast television environment. Within that environment, producers are encouraged to view the series as a potentially significant revenue stream for the production company and for the network, both of which are driven by the revenue streams of advertisers. This system encourages television producers to shape their programs according to the commercial needs of the marketplace. However, in the case of *The West Wing*, the concept of "quality television" has been a crucial consideration. The visual economy employed by the producers in crafting *The West Wing*'s style—rapid-fire dialogue, film camera, Steadicam, dark lighting, and letterboxed broadcast format—serve as cues to viewers that what they are watching correlates with other programs identified as quality television. Surely there is more to what constitutes quality for television viewers than these stylistic decisions, but they serve a crucial function for producers and consumers in demarcating the boundaries of this concept. Further, producers' public responses in the form of interviews and press kit materials reveal much of this attention to quality, even when that term is not explicitly mobilized. For producers, quality encapsulates a set of criteria through which a viewer can determine a program's status and make viewing decisions. The prevalent emphasis on

realism among producers' discourse works primarily as an off-shoot of their sense of the nature of quality: it must be realistic, incorporating aspects of both empirical and emotional realism, suggesting fidelity to the physical and historical world as well as narrative fidelity. All of this indicates *The West Wing*'s producers may not think of the series in particularly complex ways, or if they do, they suborn those perspectives in favor of a relatively simplistic understanding of the program as a commodity that attracts affluent, educated viewers.

At the same time, *The West Wing*'s producers also respond to the unique status of their series as a lightning rod for the debate over the nature of quality television itself. In Chapter 2, I provided evidence for the constant murmur among producers about how well *The West Wing* and quality television fit together, a match that is only partially by design according to them. The series' producers encourage viewers to look past any economic motives to an idealized conception of television's possibilities as realized in their own program. Of course, the cynic reads these pleas as self-aggrandizement. But even after such cynicism scours them, there remains a residue of hopefulness on the part of *The West Wing*'s producers that viewers will allow it to move them in a way few other programs have. In this almost naïve optimism for television's possibilities lie the seeds of a willingness to check more powerful motives for profit. Producers' employment of the practice of prudence through the ongoing production of judgment suggests a struggle between the realist discourses of profit and the agitating discourses of idealism.

Because of this ideological struggle and the nature of the program's content, *The West Wing* has also become a program that represents contemporary U.S. politics through the eyes of idealistic, energetic public servants. On the contrary, the role of political idealism as the standard around which producers marshal their skills and organize their work is paramount.

What emerges is a television series steeped in the formal style of cinema, arguing visually for an understanding of our political process as one with deep social impact and important cultural implications. These producers do not take lightly the responsibility to represent our leaders honestly.

Producers have a relatively high degree of control over production, but relatively low degree of control over the hermeneutics of reception and consumption. Journalists and fans are required to play by the representational rules a program's producers have laid out, but what journalists, online fans, and other viewers do with the representations they encounter in a given program is more directly controlled by their own points of view, experiences, and values. In Chapter 3, I showed that with print journalists, the starting point is critique. As professional critics, many of the journalists who write about *The West Wing* would be perceived as flippant, slack, or unprofessional by their peers if they did not approach the series from an evaluative, critical perspective. In the spirit of a critique rooted in democratic principles of open inquiry, free and honest circulation of information to the public, and healthy skepticism of those who wield power in U.S. society, journalists enter the public debate predisposed to address the series with a much more keen eye than other viewers.

At this level of response, journalists as a group find the series both enticing and frustrating. They are enticed by what they consider a unique blend of cinematic art and political idealism that arrived just as the public was beginning to show serious signs of political weariness and fatigue. In 1999 and 2000, many wanted nothing to do with the lived reality of U.S. presidential politics, but the series seemed to afford and invite an opportunity for fantasy and escape. Even with a president quick to anger when those close to him were harmed and unwilling to be completely forthcoming to the public about a potentially

debilitating disease, the series became for journalists a representation of the West Wing about which we could genuinely be proud.

And yet, journalists also became frustrated by the extent of *The West Wing*'s use of emotional appeals to tug at the viewer's heartstrings and to encourage unreflective patriotism. Many journalists' have been significantly embittered by what they identified as a kind of sham, one in which the clever viewer reads not political idealism but rather unabashed commercialism. Indeed, as I demonstrated in Chapter 3, at the same time that journalists identified with the series culturally and politically for its portrait of hardworking public servants, many found themselves repelled by an overt linkage within the text of the series between quality television as a visual style and idealism as a way to sell affluent audiences to advertisers.

Many journalists have also seized on *The West Wing* as an opportunity to voice their frustrations over what they perceive as the limits of the medium of television itself. In producing a program packaged for educated, affluent audiences in order to be more palatable and consumable, the series' producers have created and circulated what many journalists identify as a false realism. For these journalists, the series is made to feel real, to feel like a West Wing we would like to see made real, but for journalists it is instead just another way to feed the commercial machine. What is most egregious about this false realism for journalists is the way it simplifies contemporary U.S. politics almost to the point of abstraction, while at the same time employing the trappings of realism to hide that simplification.

The cynical tone of many of these reactions fuels the reader's sense of rejection on the part of these journalists, as if they wish to wash their hands of the entire sordid affair. I also argued in Chapter 3 that although their station as professional critics (and fans) may

prompt their continued attention to the series, consistent use of such a cynical tone in their public discourse limits their engagement with other fans and citizens. In one sense, such disengagement is necessary, lest they become so attached to the series that they fail in their mission to critique it. There is a paradoxical quality to the journalists' cynical response, in that it often can be linked to an inherent idealism about the role of politics in public life. In its most robust incarnations, such cynicism has the power to reveal discontinuities in social and political life, and as such becomes another voice with which citizens and social critics may speak. Thus, in some cases, cynicism is marshaled in the aid of social critique.

However, in many other cases, the journalists' repeated decision to disengage with the unstable and heated combination of television and politics also keeps them removed from the kinds of interaction with other citizens that can aid in the production of creative solutions to political problems and to spur political action. If these journalistic reactions were less cemented in the logic of print journalism and its structures of circulation (and its own motives for profit and commercialism), there would be more opportunities to engage passionate others. Once the cynical mode is converted from healthy skepticism to complete disengagement, viewers have woven themselves into a web of discourse from which it becomes much harder to be extracted. Especially when the subject is one as amorphous as the moral necessity of the boundary between entertainment and politics, a viewer can quickly find herself without the necessary resources to ask good questions or to address problems effectively. Voiced in a predominantly cynical register, the problem can sound intractable and futile. Though a cynical viewer sees the need for critique and assesses the problem, cynicism can form an effective barrier against action or the pursuit of change. Many of the

responses from the community of print journalists follow this path, and as such are limited in the ways they engage political problems.

The reactions of another prominent group of *West Wing* viewers, online fans, reveal yet another set of social practices unique to their particular social and cultural milieu. In Chapter 4, I described how the internet provides a cultural space in venues such as alt.tv.the-west-wing in which individuals can try on new identities, create new social bonds unfettered by geographical limitations, and rehearse cultural practices and arguments they can then enact in their daily lives and in their actual communities. Online communication also can discourage willingness to remain engaged when the consequences for social failure begin to rise. However, social critics such as Sunstein have argued it can also encourage too little casual socialization, replacing it with pre-selected groups with whom online participants more easily identify.

Among viewers of *The West Wing* who participate on alt.tv.the-west-wing, a specific set of practices have arisen that encourage maintenance of a space for cultural rehearsal while at the same time increasing willingness to engage and remain open to variety among the social group. In Chapter 4, I argued that far from occurring in a virtual vacuum, online fans both repeat and extend the discourses of producers and journalists. One can find discussion among online fans of the series that understand it primarily as a commodity. One can also find arguments about the program's merits cast in a cynical tone that offer only summary judgments and then disengage from further debate. However, compared to producers and journalists, online fans are much less predictable. This is due, at least in part, to their understanding of the series as both an object to be considered *and* as a place to be encountered, lived in, moved through, and engaged. Especially on alt.tv.the-west-wing,

where discussion of the series as an aesthetic object mingles with discussion of it as a political phenomenon, the *The West Wing* becomes a site to mine for a deeper understanding of viewers' roles as both fans and citizens.

However, the unique contours of online fans' interactions are also due to the nature of internet forums themselves. Like most other fan forums, these participants seek fellowship outside discussion of the text alone. They share experiences and values loosely related to that week's episode, but threads can range across a much wider spectrum of interests and concerns. In this particular group, in which political identity is so fundamentally linked to fan identity, the move toward fellowship outside of but prompted by the text of the series encourages two parallel practices crucial to the daily maintenance of the community.

Participants of alt.tv.the-west-wing are more likely to tolerate dissenting political and aesthetic judgments within the forum itself. They are also quite comfortable with humor and play in their posts. These two elements work in conjunction with one another to increase opportunities for participation: increased tolerance of dissent maintains a space for those who disagree, and use of humor and play encourages new creative connections between typically disparate topics (like art and politics) that helps to regulate emotion through frequent and sudden changes in tone and voice.

Further, the practice of encouraging consideration of practical knowledge on the forum limits the extent to which the group must rely on expert opinion (either of producers, critics, or politicians) for the production of knowledge, both about the series and about other topics of interest. While journalists are bound by the codes of their profession to seek out and found their critiques on expert opinion, online fans use the collective wisdom and situated knowledge of the community to answer questions and solve problems. In the short

term, such knowledge can be diffuse, disparate, and even inaccurate, but over time the community vets each issue and resolves it in a much more open and ultimately context-specific way than more scientific methods. This means individual participants can produce judgments about subjects and issues for which they have some factual knowledge but for which all questions have not or cannot be answered.

However, this is also a practice one is likely to find in wide use among many other fan forums. I also argued in Chapter 4 that what is specific to alt.tv.the-west-wing is the way these participants intermingle their judgments about the art and the politics of the series. Over and again (and against the occasional explicit objection of others in the group), participants allow their assessments of series' aesthetic and political dimensions to overlap, share space, and interpenetrate. However, when alt.tv.the-west-wing participants express anxiety over maintaining clear conceptual boundaries, they see connections and possibilities between entertainment and politics and fantasy and reality that often annoy, worry, or frighten producers and journalists. Such increased comfort with porous conceptual boundaries works together with an emphasis on practical knowledge to make it easier for online fans to accept and work with them.

Reworking Responses: Communities of Judgment and Fan Citizenship

Each of these groups of viewers enacts a set of practices in response to *The West Wing* marked by their particular circumstances. In one sense, the opportunity to parse the various practices, patterns of expression, and modes of address of these three groups of *West Wing* viewers is important in itself. If we hope to understand with any specificity or complexity the nature of our cultural landscape, we need scholarship that addresses the specifics and complexity of actual viewers' responses, and we need to be able to locate those

responses in the cultural terrain in which they arise, develop, and circulate. In particular, the preceding analysis has brought out some helpful insights into the nature of contemporary cultural communication that span across and through the specific perspectives of these three prominent groups of viewers. The similarities of cultural practice among these groups are more significant than their differences, because they point to potentially far-reaching implications. Until now, I have only sketched the sense in which “communities of judgment” and “fan citizenship” describe specific social structures and practices arising out of our contemporary historical moment. These terms warrant a more sustained elaboration in light of the preceding analysis.

Communities of Judgment

If one consistent aspect of the three communities of viewers can be identified, it is this: community participants come together for the expressed purpose of evaluation on shifting terrain not cemented by factual or verifiable knowledge. Put simply, they are concerned with the problem of making judgments. When understood as an adhesive or conductive material that drives those who disagree to overcome a significant degree of cognitive dissonance and engage their interlocutors, we can finally begin to formulate a sustained and stronger response to the fears expressed by critics of social fragmentation and isolation.

In order to begin this process, let me draw the reader’s attention to a recent work that connects the need for engagement with the practices of rhetoric. In her book, *Talking to Strangers*, Danielle S. Allen writes:

Rhetoric, understood as the art of talking to strangers as equals and of proving that one has also their good at heart, inspires the trust that provides a consent-based regime with the flexibility needed to garner, from citizens of diverse backgrounds, consent to decisions made in uncertainty (156).

The practices of viewers in their communities presented here can be helpfully understood as part of a general program of trust production like the one Allen suggests. Given a lack of access to more traditional methods of understanding others, online interaction relies heavily on interpretation of written texts produced by others. When strangers come together to interact in a public space, they must find ways to indicate to others that they can be trusted.¹⁶¹ In fan forums especially, a participant's inability to speak with certainty about the text produces a fundamental context in which answers are "made in uncertainty."

When communities are in the process of strengthening bonds, they are by necessity in the process of generating resources for trust: the more forum participants share, honestly and openly, the more they build connections upon which they can draw when they are unsure of another's intent. As Allen argues, "sociability, not rationality, produces agreement" (96). Cynicism and withdrawal from public participation are more likely to occur in an environment turned brittle from lack of trust. Rather than to rely on calcified forms of logic and reason that wantonly eschew understanding of and attention to emotion, viewers of *The West Wing* take on and struggle with the incoherent, conflicting, and troublesome aspects of the connections between art and politics, fiction and reality. They find ways to remain engaged and connected, to produce and rejuvenate the bonds of trust that serve as the basis for the production of community and political understanding.

In a society that claims to be a representative democracy, the character one projects—that image of oneself produced and sustained in the minds of others—is arguably more fundamental to contemporary citizenship than it was even a century ago. To be able to take on and perform a public style comfortable with porous boundaries between social and

¹⁶¹ One of Michael Warner's fundamental facets of contemporary publics is that they are made up of strangers (55-57).

political categories is a practice well-suited for our times. To enact such a character requires the fertile ground of a community rooted in the kind of trust Allen calls for and for which some forms of community, especially those organized around persistent implementation of judgment, are also well-suited. Such a character enacted within such a community is more tolerant of difference, dissent, and open conflict, and is eminently prepared for the future of democracy as it continues to evolve.

None of the three communities I have studied inherently possesses the necessary resources to overcome the anxieties and tensions with which they are faced through their encounters with *The West Wing*. They each struggle against the very same issues of fragmentation and access to social capital that Sunstein and Putnam argue threatens to destroy our social fabric. In considering these viewers' direct, varied, and conflicting responses to the series, the kind of social character and community to which Allen points are at least echoed, but more accurately emulated, in the responses themselves. Consider, for example, how we might begin to see the implications of communities of judgment for a more nuanced understanding of contemporary U.S. public life.

Can these three different groups of viewers—producers, journalists, and online fans—be accurately labeled as “communities”? What would be the benefits in attempting to do so? Viewers within each of these groups share a keen interest in *The West Wing* and a consistent attention to perceived problems with managing the various conceptual boundaries between fiction, reality, art, and politics, but they enact those similarities somewhat differently—sometimes strikingly so. What emerges from such comparisons is a schema for considering what characteristics ultimately facilitate the maintenance of community as a means to bring

into relief those aspects of social commerce that encourage the toleration of dissent and the practical knowledge that fosters engagement and reduces cynicism.

In a review of the history of the social importance of the term “community,” Nicholas Jankowski draws his readers’ attention to the consistent lack of agreement on the part of scholars about where precisely the term’s value lies (60-67). Early conceptions emphasized geographic place, whereas more contemporary definitions stress a “sense of collectivity” (60). Williams’ *Keywords* provides a helpful explanation of the term: “The complexity of community thus relates to the difficult interaction between the tendencies originally distinguished in the historical development: on the one hand the sense of direct common concern; on the other hand the materialization of various forms of common organization” (76). This shared sense of purpose, of coming together (actually or virtually) for a common need or desire lies at the heart of our use of the term.

For example, *The West Wing*’s producers as a group can be understood to share a common cause: to produce a popular, profitable series that will secure their fame and fortune. To the extent that their work is oriented and organized toward these goals, we can reasonably use “community” to describe them. Among journalists who write about *The West Wing*, we can similarly point to some causes common among all the individuals involved: to provide for their readers an intelligent and reasoned review of the series’ beneficial and detrimental facets, historically situated as broadcast television appearing at the turn of the century, professionally written and tending to encourage more readers of the periodical (and probably also securing them fame and fortune). The participants of alt.tv.the-west-wing together constitute their own kind of community, focused on the passionate expression of fandom for the series in a context in which questions about it may be answered, problems solved, and

new practical knowledge generated and circulated. Thus, there is a “common concern,” a shared sense of purpose, enacted within each of the groups we have encountered.

However, these groups share another characteristic not found in all but only some communities. Because the object of their attention is a cultural artifact with narrative, spatial, temporal, and ideological dimensions, participants within each of these communities address their common text through registers of evaluation; much of their communal labor is centered on understanding, interpreting, and judging a text. In this sense, these communities are constituted as communities of judgment, in which the need to produce both artistic and political judgment moves to the center of community life and other fundamental aspects (like fellowship and collectivity), while still prominent, are subordinated to judgment.

Communities share a common concern, but that concern can be enacted in many ways: geographically-rooted communities share a need to interface with the land and sustain it; social communities are concerned with producing a space within which relationships can develop; economic communities emerge in order to ensure the efficient circulation of capital and resources. Each of these kinds of communities produces judgment as part of its smooth and regular operation: people living in the same town must decide whether changing the water supply will be more or less advantageous to the soil; a bridge club must determine whether increasing their numbers will ensure the permanence of the group or reduce its effectiveness; employees in a large company must determine whether unionizing will be the best path for the employees and the company, and so on, always making evaluative decisions in contexts of uncertainty. However, communities of judgment are those in which evaluation is the organizing practice around which all other community interaction is centered. In other kinds of community, judgment is prominent but not central, and this is a significant

difference when it comes to the ways communities of judgment tend to respond to public discourses, especially when those discourses seem to be pulling factions of the community into splinter groups. In the case of *West Wing* viewers, the focus on a concrete object, as opposed to a more abstract foundation for relationship, has tended to keep participants returning to the discussion and the community despite sometimes bitter disagreement.

Each of the groups I consider above engage these practices of judgment in different ways. For example, in Chapter 2 I showed how producers' implementation of judgment, through their rhetorically constructed public argument for its quality, is a manifestation of their desire to produce a consistent positive public image of their series for consumers. It also served as a means to circulate an idealized corrective to the prevailing political milieu. In the sense that all rhetorical strategies are underscored by an interest in the cultural production of "right judgment" among audiences, the powerful consistency according to which producers' position the series in the public sphere indicates judgment's important role for them.

By contrast, the community of journalists who write about *The West Wing* engages a different set of professional and ideological problems, yet still attends to the series through perspectives of judgment. In order to do their jobs professionally and effectively, print critics serve the public in their capacity as evaluators: as professional judges of cultural artifacts. Chapter 3 explained that though their public interaction with each other and their readers is limited or non-existent, the consistency with which they respond to the series across a broad geographic and ideological range of perspectives testifies to their consistent attention to its assessment. Like producers, print journalists enact those judgments in a professional and institutional context; their responses are activated partially by their need to attract more

income to their institution. However, unlike producers and, significantly, like online fans, journalists are not ideologically committed to the consistent production of a univocal and coherent representation of the series in the public sphere. Instead, the community of journalists responds to the series with a broad multivocality that more closely resembles the public deliberation we promote in our conceptions of democratic citizenship. This behavior stands in contrast to claims made by some media critics that “the media” is characterized by a prominent univocality. However, the significant degree of detrimental cynicism journalists have allowed themselves to produce as a by-product of their lack of public interaction forestalls much of the deliberative promise communities of judgment hold for contemporary representations of citizenship. Of these three communities, online fans of *alt.tv.the-west-wing* have most managed to produce and sustain the kind of continual public engagement a democratic U.S. public culture requires.

First and most significantly, *alt.tv.the-west-wing* develops out of an interest in providing a forum for the voices of *fans* of *The West Wing*. In Chapter 4, I showed how the group comes together in order to hear from one another’s thoughts regarding the program and issues related to it. Topics not deemed relevant to those goals are actively policed by the more vocal and dogmatic participants of the group, and it requires considerable social fortitude to resist such hegemonic practices. Even when participants can muster such courage, powerful rules of decorum must also be overcome. One must become a pariah in many internet communities just to take an opposing view. Such trolls mark the outer edges of each forum with their transgressive language. This state of affairs has encouraged web denizens to accept as common sense that forums are hotbeds of rabid protectionist attitudes: “Don’t wander aimlessly into Forum X if you don’t absolutely love Topic Y; they’ll rip your

head off.” As I have previously noted, this is an important part of Hills’ critique of online fandom, and it also figures in Sunstein’s formulations as well (*Republic.com* 25, 32).

A fair amount of the interaction among alt.tv.the-west-wing participants does take on this character, but the presence of political issues as a viable topic for discussion alters the contours of this tactical approach in important ways. In Chapter 4, I noted the continued resistance among certain group participants to the presence of discussion of actual politics. At issue is the sense that the forum should be about *The West Wing*, and while it presents its narratives as intertwined with the political issues it raises, these dissenters seem to feel discussion of contemporary U.S. politics brings an unnecessary differentiation and broadening to the group. This is precisely what Putnam and Sunstein are worried about: that groups will continue what they identify as a trend toward disengagement with others who do not share their pre-existing beliefs. The kind of cynicism I have analyzed among journalists, these social critics argue, exists precisely among those groups most interested in disengaging with social interaction through fragmentation and isolation.

However, this perspective on disengagement overlooks communities of judgment (or at least overlooks all of their characteristics, opting for a snapshot of community behavior rather than studying them in depth). Communities of judgment, which develop out of an interest in hearing *all* points of view on the object of interest, are more tolerant of dissent, even though that dissent occurs within an often shrill communicative environment. They tolerate dissenters because they seek not univocality or the production of a virtual echo-chamber, as Putnam and Sunstein might suggest, but rather the *production of practical knowledge*—a resource for a deeper understanding of their object, which in this case is *The West Wing*. Participants in communities of judgment share Raymond Williams’ “common

concern,” but that concern is paradoxically not consensus so much as a desire to broaden knowledge through encounter and debate. These participants appear genuinely to enjoy conflict, and many use it as a productive mechanism to move toward deeper knowledge.

Thus, communities of judgment may be limited to those communities that specifically arise out of a common interest in interrogating and deepening the group’s knowledge of the object of study. As I have alluded to above, there are plenty of fan websites on the internet run by individuals wishing to showcase their knowledge and devotion to *The West Wing*, but without a group of others among whom all have an opportunity to present evidence and arguments, the resources for community maintenance are harder to develop. It is not clear from the limited scope of this study to what extent such practices may be found among other object- and judgment-centered communities.

One implication of this aspect of the community of judgment is that many online fan forums are likely to display these criteria. Television programs that articulate with contemporary discourses invite attention to their art, a practice all successful television series have in common, as it is the nature of televisual success to access discourses many viewers find engaging. Once the spark of recognition of a program’s role as a site for the production and circulation of meaning has gathered steam, it can lead to other kinds of understanding. In the case of *The West Wing*, this has led to political engagement built on a deepening of practical knowledge of political matters. (For other programs, such understanding is likely to develop in other directions specific to them.) Thus, a community of judgment is one that develops out of a common concern with a particular object of which participants hope to deepen their understanding. For media texts and other sites of cultural production and

circulation, a broad set of perspectives only widens the pool of resources from which participants can draw to create that understanding.

However, this concept does not fully explain the kinds of responses I have analyzed in the preceding chapters. Because of the unique status of *The West Wing* as a serial drama about political operatives, and the decisions made by some of its viewers to mingle (if at times begrudgingly) their aesthetic judgments of the series as fans alongside and intertwined with their political judgments as U.S. citizens, their interaction suggests a separate, though related, practice. One potentially useful moniker for this practice is “fan citizenship.”

Fan Citizenship

One central element of my analysis of *West Wing* viewer responses is the specific ways some viewers choose to allow the boundaries between fiction and reality and art and politics to remain porous. Though for reasons I have already considered, recognition and acceptance of this permeability is variable across different groups of viewers, the issue is significant for each of them. *The West Wing*’s producers encourage others to collapse the art/politics divide—the program’s realism supports and extends its quality—but maintain the boundary between fiction and reality. Journalists’ indicate strong anxieties about whether blurring of either boundary is productive for television viewers or U.S. citizens. Online fans’ multivocal approach suggests many recognize the potential dangers but also the concomitant benefits of allowing the boundary to remain fluid. Thus, in a variety of ways, we can see viewers using the series and their personal interest in it to carve out a range of responses to the issues that concern them.

So, what is a “fan citizen,” and how does the concept apply to the ways dedicated *West Wing* viewers behave? A fan citizen is someone whose public identity rests at the

nexus of fandom and citizenship: being a fan informs how one enacts one's citizenship, and being a citizen informs how one enacts one's fandom. It is a mode of public identity that arises out of the recognition that the boundaries between fiction and reality and entertainment and politics are quite porous. However, this insight is not unique to the present study. As I have indicated, Van Zoonen provides a useful and robust framework for considering the ways entertainment and politics interact in contemporary society. She highlights three similarities between fandom and citizenship:

- Both fan communities and political constituencies come into being as a result of performance
- Both resemble each other when it comes to the endeavors that make one part of the community
- Both rest on emotional investments intrinsically linked to rationality and lead to "affective intelligence" (2005, 53).¹⁶²

Throughout this project I have shown how *West Wing* viewers perform their roles as producers, journalists, and fans in connection with the series itself; that community is central to the way online forum participants situate their participation; that the passion and engagement of fans can arguably overcome the powerful lure of disengagement. As such, one byproduct of the current project is that it independently confirms Van Zoonen's similarities.

However, my study also suggests the need to add at least one additional element to Van Zoonen's schema. In addition to performance, community, and affective intelligence, we must recognize the central role of judgment in allowing participants to recognize connections between fictional representations and actual political and social figures, roles, and practices. Whereas communities of judgment develop out of their focus on judgment of

¹⁶²Her use of the term "affective intelligence," drawn from work on emotion in the social sciences, describes how "without the affective investments resulting from enthusiasm and anxiety, political interest and commitment would falter...just like fan communities would wane without the emotional input of their members" (66).

a concrete object, fan citizenship describes the ways some citizens draw upon their fandom through judgment to extend and strengthen both aspects of their public character. Thus, fan citizens find fertile ground in communities in which judgment serves as the linchpin.

Fan citizenship, combined with and supported by the open, tolerant, and engaged nature of the community of judgment in which it is enacted, can be understood from three critical perspectives. First, fan citizens enact their fandom in public communities informed by their sense of political action and organization; in the case of *alt.tv.the-west-wing*, this is rooted in the U.S. tradition of deliberative democracy. Second, fan citizens also enact their citizenship in the public sphere of the online forum in ways informed by their practices of fandom: they remain engaged, eschewing cynical retreats from public space, by expressing a passion for their subject and expecting similar passion from others. Finally, because fan citizens readily blend aesthetic and political judgment, they develop an understanding of cultural artifacts like television programs from individual political perspectives at the same time that they develop political positions understood from particular perspectives as fans of those artifacts. Remaining both aware of this dual characteristic and invested in maintaining it provides recurring opportunities to reconsider questions raised in the group from a different point of view. I address each of these aspects of the fan citizen in turn.

(1) Fandom Is Like Citizenship: A Deliberative Democracy

Fans are rarely loners. Fans organize into communities in a variety of ways, via fanzines, conventions, and online forums and websites. However, not all of these forms of communal sharing are necessarily comprised of “citizens”: zines often accept submissions, but are organized, circulated, and produced by a relatively small numbers of fans; conventions are similarly organized and run by a subset of the larger fan community. Many

fan websites are run by single individuals who, while frequently open to submissions from other fans, nonetheless retain the right to final editorial control over their content. Even some fan forums are moderated. But alt.tv.the-west-wing is different: entirely lacking a group moderator, it is as close to an open forum for talk as can currently be found among digital networked technologies.

It also highlights one way the “fans” of alt.tv.the-west-wing have brought their citizenship to bear on their participation: the forum operates in principle like a deliberative democracy. Beiner argues it is in the nature of political community to inherently accept responsibility:

...for political judgment entails an implied responsibility for the assumption of what may be termed a shared way of life. All political judgments are—implicitly at least—judgments about the form of collective life that it is desirable for us to pursue...what is at issue here is not ‘what should I do?’ or ‘how should I conduct myself?’ but: ‘how are we to “be” together’ (138).

It is this implicit question—“how we are to ‘be’ together”—that is at the root of all the responses encountered in this project. Each community hopes to articulate to the public its sense of itself, its constitution, in its collective rhetorical constructions. For example, print journalists continually reconstitute their community as inherently one of critique. This “quality of intensified responsibility” is one, Beiner argues, that is not present in a judgment about “the aesthetic quality of a work” (139). However, when *West Wing* fans articulate practices of fan community with practices of political judgment, the character of their fandom is altered: the forum begins to look like a deliberative democracy, in which political community and the specific questions about “how we are to ‘be’” extend beyond community politics to assessments of the series itself. As we have seen, the relationship between politics and entertainment is always a question on the table, whether for producers trying to reconcile

it, journalists worried about it, or fans imagining ways to use it. When any of these communities can be activated through the practices of fan citizenship, their fandom begins to push beyond passionate commitment to the *text* to passionate commitment to the *community*. In the case of alt.tv.the-west-wing, this prompts an awareness of fellowship and contributes to a higher degree of tolerance of dissent.

We cannot take an analogy between fan citizenship practices and our own democracy too far, however. On the forum, for example, there is no executive body charged with the responsibility of enforcing group decisions, and no judicial body to assess ruptures in conduct. There is a kind of legislative document, the FAQ, from which new participants may learn what is expected. But when posts identified as unwanted by some participants appear, the most powerful recourse is vocalizing opposition, followed by a silent treatment. This is a problematic system with which to manage disruptive elements of a polity. However, it does allow more room for radical dissent. In my final comments below, I show how even internet trolls seem to feel more able to speak in a community of judgment made up of fan citizens, and this is something about which all fans of deliberative democracy have cause to celebrate. While fan citizens do not necessarily participate in perfect deliberative democracies, important elements of the contemporary U.S. experience of citizenship can be seen to inform our understanding of what fan citizens might be.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ There is evidence to suggest that the phenomenon I am describing shifts perceptibly when transferred to other political traditions. For example, uk.media.tv.west-wing is a fan newsgroup for viewers in the United Kingdom, and my experience of that forum suggests its participants experience their “fan citizenship” in notably different ways due to their different political context.

(2) Citizenship Is Like Fandom: Passionate, Engaged

It also turns out that the practices of fandom are helpful in understanding the practices of citizenship, at least, again, when both are situated within contemporary U.S. culture. As Van Zoonen suggests, both fan communities and political constituencies “rest on emotional investments.” Such passionate connections provide the energy participants need to overcome the various obstacles they inevitably encounter: complacency, inertia, and cynicism each can derail a community’s goals if not considered and vigilantly resisted. The cynical responses of print journalists to the series exemplify this danger. Though their reactions to the series indicate a nascent idealism centered on an image of a robust political life and an aesthetically beneficial television environment, most often their conclusions about the specifics of this program fail to fully identify it with those ideals. Rather, print journalists consistently respond to the series with a strong cynicism. As I have shown in Chapter 3, such cynicism is an important register for voicing public discontent, and the work of such journalists is often vigorously debated among online participants, indicating its power to evoke response. However, given its tendency toward disengagement, the tasks of offering, debating, and enacting creative and productive tactics that can realize their ideals necessarily fall to others who would remain engaged, regardless of the quality of their work. Where cynics will settle for nothing short of perfection, passionate, engaged citizens must take what they have been given and find creative ways to make it work.

By contrast, emotional investments of alt.tv.the-west-wing participants differ in that the more knowledge they gain of their object, the more engaged with it they become. Rather than to disengage from public debate about the series and its imperfections, fans online also go beyond simple acceptance of the series. In the post-9/11 “special episode” thread

considered in Chapter 4, we saw a prominent example of participants' aesthetic and political idealism. Their approach to the representations they encounter in *The West Wing* is both as an ideal, an imperfect but sometimes outstanding representation of a utopian contemporary political sphere, and as a cultural resource, a set of texts to be mined for better understanding of actual political and social life. As an ideal, the program is the object of much typical fan activity: fawning, gushing, praising, and so forth, as well as significant critique in extensive detail. As a cultural resource, the program is a starting point, ripe for elaboration, exploration, contention, and disagreement. While any of these powerful emotional registers could easily lead to disengagement when encountered in isolation, when presented in the public context of the online forum they have the potential to be transformed into productive political energies for imagining new concepts and rethinking political problems. For example, in response to the "Isaac and Ishmael" episode, forum participants passionately engaged it as fans, in some cases offering detailed accounts of the ways it did and did not live up to their sense of the program's possibilities. Their dedication to a sense that the series measure up to their high standards was clear in their impassioned and voluminous responses. When journalists like Lehmann in the *Atlantic Monthly* publish forceful critiques of *The West Wing*'s thin representations of political discourse, their passion is highlighted, though in a less powerful register given the journalistic community's constraints. In both cases passionate engagement with the text encourages passionate engagement with politics in viewers' daily lives.

By contrast, Putnam and Sunstein have argued almost the reverse of this: learning more about the world encourages a fragmentation, isolation (and cynicism) that leads to disengagement. For example, Sunstein claims:

A market dominated by countless versions of the “Daily Me” would make self-government less workable. In many ways it would reduce, not increase, freedom for the individuals involved. It would create a high degree of social fragmentation. It would make mutual understanding far more difficult among individuals and groups (*Republic.com* 192).

Taken out of context, this is a particularly frightful view of the current political context, as it imagines a public sphere that discourages engagement and encourages the least open kinds of social “enclaves.” Putnam is equally grave about the potential harm to our social fabric when he writes: “silently, without warning...we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of a century” (27).

I do not wish to paint Sunstein or Putnam as alarmists. Indeed, Sunstein contextualizes his concern:

Emerging technologies ... hold out far more promise than risk. Indeed they hold out great promise from the republican point of view, especially insofar as they make it so much easier for ordinary people to learn about countless topics, and to seek out endlessly diverse opinions (*Republic.com* 201).

Putnam is also quite careful about limiting the reach of his claims. However, where these authors see a grave risk for fragmentation and disengagement, my research does not find such troubles. In fact, there seems to be more of this kind of behavior among journalists writing for the kinds of “general interest intermediaries” Sunstein valorizes—daily newspapers and magazine’s like *Time* and *Newsweek*—than among specific online groups like alt.tv.the-west-wing. Wherein lies the difference between our conclusions? The most significant difference stems from the fact that the present study has used ethnographic methods to pay close attention to the rhetorical character of the situated interactions of online participants. This approach reveals a number of practices at work among viewers that may have gone unnoticed by the more wide-angle perspectives taken by Putnam, Sunstein, and

other broad social theorists. In missing the kind of engagement fostered by fan activity and articulated in communities of judgment, the terrible scenarios Sunstein and Putnam envision is effectively kept at bay by the constant willingness on the part of forum participants to keep their sleeves rolled up and their arms elbow deep in the messiness of everyday life.

Here we can finally return to our strong response from Chapter 1 in favor of the practices employed by communities of *West Wing* viewers. Though their arguments are acceptable as far as they go, we may now wish to differ with Sunstein and Putnam that fragmentation and isolation in themselves are problematic for deliberative democracy and social capital. Online forum participants certainly do tend to cordon themselves away in their corner of the world wide web (although alt.tv.the-west-wing is about as open as internet forums get). They are from some perspectives isolated and fragmented from the larger society. But this community is anything but disengaged from U.S. politics. Being isolated or fragmented may not be a problem if the practical knowledge a group produces and circulates enlightens all the various roles an individual takes on in contemporary society.

Whether one looks at contemporary citizenship as more-or-less engaged (as does Van Zoonen) or disengaged (as do Putnam and Sunstein), the kinds of practices I have grouped together as “fan citizenship” use cultural artifacts to engage the political milieu and produce passionate political judgment.¹⁶⁴ Thus, we can understand the previously berated and reviled passion fans exercise in the public sphere as precisely the kind of passion an idealized version of a deliberative democracy would imagine for its citizens. At least in the case of the participants of alt.tv.the-west-wing, responses to the series indicate such passion in relation to political judgment seems to be both active and multivocal.

¹⁶⁴ See Hariman and Lucaites (2001 12-15) on a rhetorical perspective on the relationship between emotion and citizens’ judgment.

(3) Aesthetic and Political Judgment Intertwined

The way forum participants intertwine aesthetic and political judgment has much to do with what appears to be a collective perspective on the boundaries between fiction and reality and politics and entertainment.¹⁶⁵ The reality/fantasy binary, and some viewers' unease with its potential for fuzziness, are issues for which I have provided evidence throughout this project. However, as my analysis of the double-blind what-if thread in soc.history.what-if in Chapter 4 illustrates, other viewers prefer to use the tension between reality and fantasy productively. These community participants are more forgiving of the kind of play that opens new potential for deliberation about the empirical and emotional realism promoted by the program's representations. Such fan citizenship highlights the way articulation between viewers' attitudes and the series polices the boundary even as it raises questions about it.

In addition, throughout this project, I have addressed the role of realism with regard to the imaginary boundary between "real" and "fictional" politics, and especially viewers' fears about a lack of policing of *that* boundary by the program's producers. Chapters 2 and 3 document the anxieties expressed by producers and journalists about the maintenance of a less porous boundary between fiction and reality. However, what is discussed with significant trepidation by these viewers is not only accepted but often lauded by fans online. As I have shown in Chapter 4, rather than to worry about the status of the knowledge that might be gleaned from a fictional resource, many online fans of *The West Wing* take the depiction of politics in the series as a starting point and use their community to debate and

¹⁶⁵ Sometimes "entertainment" is replaced by "art." However, this is nearly always in the context of what could or might have been, rather than an evaluative category of what exists, especially when it comes to television. The reader will likely see many ways this is deeply connected with precisely the very issues and anxieties raised by the question of quality television I have considered above and against which *The West Wing* is nearly always compared.

discuss any aspects they find incomplete or suspect. The “Supreme Court Questions” thread is a good example of one way this has worked within the group: participants bring together their aesthetic and political knowledge in the interest of both solving a fan’s question of realism and applicability and attending to a citizen’s question of interpretation and understanding. In so doing, they accept the flexibility of any perceived boundary between entertainment and politics and work with it as an available means of producing practical knowledge. These participants address their understanding of the Supreme Court, not through strictly logical arguments or through appeals to authority, but through a combination of a situated awareness of their practical knowledge as citizens, and an appeal through their fandom to passionate others who care about *The West Wing*’s effectiveness as a cultural text. Their roles as fans and as citizens were both necessary elements of this discourse.

This is not to suggest there are not many online participants who are quite anxious about this boundary. Just as fan citizenship does not always arise out of communities of judgment, different manifestations of fan citizenship are enacted differently. However, in the case of public reactions to *The West Wing*, evidence suggests that the responses least likely to be burdened by anxieties over the fiction/reality boundary can most often be found among online forums.

The intertwining of aesthetic and political judgment allows fan citizens more easily to recognize similarities between their identities as fans and citizens. Meanwhile, awareness of their proximity and similarity also aids in the production of resources for resisting potentially debilitating critiques, cynical denials of efficacy fostered over decades (in the case of television) and centuries (in the case of liberal democracy). Instead, in allowing the two realms of judgment to remain in productive tension with one another, fan citizens alloy

aesthetic and political judgment together, strengthening each. For example, among journalists, the peculiar and persistent use of the lead-in to playfully address the blurring of the fiction/reality boundary has become a situated way to recognize the connections between the aesthetic and the political. Though journalists are professionally constrained in the ways they may respond to such issues, in the case of the lead-in, *West Wing* print critics have developed a practical means to underscore the relationship between aesthetics and politics without foregrounding it. Among online fans, when they discuss Ritchie's lack of response to President Bartlet, they are not only calling for a more aesthetically powerful drama, but also rehearsing the possibilities for a more robust deliberative democracy in which participants from both parties offer cogent characterizations of U.S. politics. In both cases, the particular character of their emotional investments as fans motivates a constant enactment of political judgment as citizens.

Parting Shots: Community, Politics, and Tolerance for Trolls

In the preceding pages, I have endeavored to elaborate on what I see as some of the theoretical implications of my research into public responses to *The West Wing*. Most notably, I have argued that two concepts, "communities of judgment" and "fan citizenship," can help both to explain the often curious responses many producers, journalists, and fans of the series have expressed, and to offer a potential corrective to some of the current theories about the relationship between television, politics, and everyday life. I wish to consider briefly a tactic familiar to many internet users currently understood as a problem on many online forums and apparently unique to them, trolling. By introducing this discussion at the conclusion of this project, I hope to bring together many of the strands of the current study and to suggest at least one direction similar research in the future might lead.

Internet trolls are transgressive net denizens whose tactics, and others' responses to them, operate at the intersection of community, judgment, politics, and public life. Unlike elsewhere online, on alt.tv.the-west-wing, trolls are allowed by other group participants more latitude to speak and are far more engaged. If even trolls can be encouraged to stay and debate with their interlocutors, then the practices I have endeavored to describe and assess in this project may lead to a more robust understanding of public life.

One element of online participation of all kinds—chat rooms, blogs, forums, guest books—is the presence of certain responses conspicuously marked by their lack of acceptance by the rest of the group. In many cases, such practices draw the ire of more frequent (and decorous) participants because their comments are seen by regulars as intended to fracture group identity, to cause strife among regular posters, or to be rude in the hopes of drawing out venomous retorts simply for sport. In many cases, such “outside” (as viewed by regulars) insertions are vehemently policed. The growing ubiquity of the online term “troll” identifies this trend. Troll in this context has been defined as:

An outrageous message posted to a newsgroup or mailing list or message board to bait people to answer. Trolling is a form of harassment that can take over a discussion. Well meaning defenders can create chaos by responding to trolls. The best response is to ignore it. Also, the person who posts such messages.¹⁶⁶

An annoyance usually on Messageboards who posts for the purpose of causing a disturbance. Often by making comments of a slanderous nature, accusatory, or just general pain-in-the-assness.¹⁶⁷

These definitions highlight two elements of troll messages: they are incendiary by a given group's standards, and they seek response. Messages couched in a concessionary style (“I’m not trying to start a fight, but...”, “I know this is not a favorable view on this board, but...”)

¹⁶⁶From www.walthowe.com/glossary/t.html

¹⁶⁷From www.sanguinarius.org/~sarasvati/terms.htm

or presented as politely or naively seeking information would not be identified as trolls by group regulars. However, once they are so identified and that identification is assented to by a critical mass of group members, the jig is up: what follows is shunning en masse, and only the most green of newcomers to the group reply to any future posts by the same user.¹⁶⁸

Though trolls are specifically not participants in the group in good faith, but rather viewed by group regulars as infiltrators and instigators, their social function within the group often serves to strengthen and re-affirm the purposes for which that specific online community has come together. Working as a foil to Allen's political friendship, which "cultivates habits of imagination that generate politically transformative experiences out of ordinary interactions among strangers" (171), trolls often work in practice as border scouts, probing the strength and commitment of the boundaries that encompass a community's ideology through their incendiary rhetoric. Trolling works in various ways to scrub an online community, drawing out the deeply committed as well as the newly initiated for public display. The possibility exists that some trolls could even be group regulars in disguise, using the troll tactic to weed out newbies and police the boundaries of the forum at the same time.¹⁶⁹ Many of the most fundamental discussions about the constitution of alt.tv.the-west-wing as a forum are sparked by the emergence of trolls, sprinkled in among other more obvious group business. It is at these moments of rupture brought on by troll practices that a group's constitutive rhetoric becomes manifest. As I noted in Chapter 2, Charland's concept is useful when considering public discourse because it highlights the way audiences are interpellated through language into subject positions without conscious recognition of

¹⁶⁸ In those cases, the simple fact such a newcomer *has* replied further tags *her* as a newbie.

¹⁶⁹ However, I find no evidence to suggest such a situation. This kind of conspiracy theory is often associated with denizens of the web, but in my view it is unlikely at best. Were it to proven accurate, one could think of such forum police as not dissimilar to our own government's CIA and NSA, another instance in a grand panoptical tradition.

persuasive tactics (133). When trolls' radically divergent positions are thrust into such a pre-constituted community, participants can find themselves suddenly defending deeply-held convictions and ideals they may not have even been consciously aware they held.

This is not to suggest that such ruptures are welcomed by all alt.tv.the-west-wing participants. Some would prefer to see those they have identified as trolls retire from the field:

Troll somewhere else, troll ("25").

it's a good think [sic] I used to deal with pre-adolescents for a living, otherwise I'd never have had the patience to troll you and slap you around. Stick with your own clueless newsgroup. We don't need any more cross posters over here ("Is It Possible...").

We seem to be getting a bit of trolling. Trust me, if you start responding to them, they'll multiply. I've seen it destroy newsgroups before. Just ignore them. It's the best strategy ("Don't Feed the Trolls").

And yet, like Plato's Socrates, trolls have appropriated the tactics of the gadfly to the online realm, and in so doing have burrowed under the collective skin of other online forum participants. This is reminiscent of DeLuca's "image events," which "are not the displays of the rulers but, rather, the discourse of subaltern counterpublics...who have purposely been excluded for political reasons from the forums of the public sphere by the rules of reason and the protocols of decorum" (20).¹⁷⁰ The major difference between image events and troll messages here is that the producers of an image event are often groups or collectives, while trolls are commonly understood to be individuals.¹⁷¹ Still, the similarities are striking. Most importantly, there is an apparently powerful need to take a place in the debate, even if it means drawing fire for one's ideas. From the perspective of a regular participant, trolls can

¹⁷⁰ Warner also discusses the concept of counterpublics at length (85-89).

¹⁷¹ Although, this need not always or even frequently be the case: trolls could be created by a group just as readily as by individuals.

often appear rash and imprudent. As such, they should not be strong candidates as examples of fan citizenship. But the way they are sometimes treated by regular alt.tv.the-west-wing participants does indicate something about the nature of fan citizens as important contemporary public figures.¹⁷²

Trolls suggest an emotional fortitude to withstand direct rebuttals that in practice are often scathing. A troll message is rarely followed up by the original poster, which has led to the sense of mischief and provocation present in some of the definitions above. In fact, there is little evidence to support the claims in some of the definitions above that trolling is undertaken for any explicit motive at all. Trolls rarely speak about anything except that which sets them off. Troll posts are the landmines of the internet. As such, they serve more as cultural markers about currently accepted boundaries for things: if your comment incites a troll post, you have hit a nerve; if many comments incite many trolls, you have collectively unearthed a significant cultural boundary.

In some cases, though, a participant accused of trolling will stand and fight. On alt.tv.the-west-wing, these occurrences are somewhat common, in direct opposition to the usual definitions and explanations of the practice of trolling suggesting its infrequency. In these exchanges we can begin to see what might be at stake for alt.tv.the-west-wing trolls and the group regulars to whom they respond, as well as why this practice might be more common in this particular forum:

...if I were a troll I would not be here as long as I have (“On Ex-Congresswoman”).

I am called a troll all the time... Apparently, if you say something someone disagrees with, you are a troll (“If Bush committed murder...”).

¹⁷² Hariman argues that because “the language of prudence is a trafficking in limits—constantly posing values against one another, strewing social conventions across the path of development, and slowing down the process of deliberation...prudence itself has to be limited, reined in, or abandoned at times” (2003 296).

OK. If I am such a troll, why don't I post more ludicrous [sic] stuff like what is heard on hate radio?? ("Judge Moore.")

In these responses, a question implicit in the concept of trolling is raised: are there rules of decorum in the newsgroup that preclude certain kinds of discourse out of hand? If we think of a troll as hyper-participatory, we can then ask, what do trolls have invested in (or want to invest in) the newsgroup itself that drives their participation despite such differences? In communities formed out of a desire for consensus, gadflies are silenced, exiled, or worse (ask Socrates). But on alt.tv.the-west-wing, the question of whether trolls have a productive role to play seems to remain perpetually in flux. In a community constituted through conflict and debate out of a desire to use judgment to produce practical knowledge, the troll seems to have a little more leeway than elsewhere online. Especially in alt.tv.the-west-wing, where the practices of fan citizenship encourage passionate debate about questions of politics as well as aesthetics, the fact that trolls are not so easily dismissed suggests a role for such open conflict in contemporary politics. One might wish to quibble, arguing that the very fact that these participants do remain engaged in the debate and stand up for themselves means they cannot be trolls. But the key here is that their early behavior was treated as troll-like by the community, but in this case they chose to stay and speak up. Something about this community encouraged them to remain engaged and at least speak their minds. I would argue that it is the nature of the community of judgment they have built and the fan citizens who populate it that encourages such openness to conflict and such an emphasis on the role of judgment based on practical knowledge culled from a truly broad spectrum of opinions.

The gadfly trolls of online newsgroups serve a purpose in the public sphere, not purified and sanitized, but muddy, imperfect, and human, the likes of which we implicitly

participate in every day: they force us to assess our own positions that might otherwise go unexamined. In this view, all trolls become an important element of social maintenance, a safety valve for the insularity so many scholars of online culture have bemoaned. That trolls on alt.tv.the-west-wing return to the very topics they know will raise the hackles of a large number of other group participants *and* stick around to engage in debate with group regulars indicates they may recognize something more at stake in the group and its relationship to politics than even the fan citizens in good standing realize. As strangers sharing a self-organized public space, regular community members may not recognize their own constitution as a bounded group, as Sunstein and Putnam fear.¹⁷³ But the practices of trolls require a rethinking of this problem, as their public calls for response push regular community members to reassess their assumptions.

Viewing trolls as gadflies brings us back to the cynical critiques of print journalists who, in a mass mediated culture, serve this function for the public, reminding us of the perils and pitfalls of our cultural discourses. This may even extend to at least a small subset of our television producers who, while always nagged by the need for profit production, nonetheless could be able to bring attention to some questions otherwise missing from public debate. In a social milieu dominated by mass media forms rooted in a one-to-many model of communication and cultural production, society relies on its professionals and elites to disseminate rhetorical arguments to the people.

But in contemporary digitally networked culture, professionals and elites may not be the most prominent rhetorical resource. Instead, mass mediated rhetorical forms are being combined with more traditional forms of communication but altered in important ways

¹⁷³ On publics as self-organized, see Warner (50-55).

through their conversion to a digitally networked medium. *The West Wing* has provided a context and resource for all three of the communities considered here to coalesce around a specific set of public questions unique to the historical context in which they occur. All such responses appear locally, are practiced locally, and are effective locally, not in shaping national policy, but in shaping attitudes about policy decisions as well as providing deliberative resources for interpreting the complex world in which they live their daily lives. Participants in communities of judgment, and especially those who employ practices of fan citizenship, confront their interlocutors and bring the full force of their rhetorical skills, judgment, argument, and taste, to the debate in the hopes of engendering identification in others regarding crucial questions of the day.

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Brett Kirkpatrick Boessen

1421 Pheasant Drive
Sherman, TX 75092
(903) 361-0837
bboessen@austincollege.edu

EDUCATION

Ph. D. *Department of Communication and Culture*, Indiana University. September 2006.

Dissertation: "Communities of Judgment and Fan Citizenship: Challenging Univocality, Cynicism, and Isolation Among Viewers of *The West Wing*."

Committee: John Lucaites (director), Barbara Klinger, Chris Anderson, Ann Mongoven (outside minor advisor).

M.A. *Department of Communication and Culture*, Indiana University, February, 2000.

B.A. *Program of Liberal Studies*, University of Notre Dame, May, 1995.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Austin College, 2004-present

M121 Introduction to Media Studies

M231 Digital Video Production I (formerly Videolab I)

M250 Film Culture

M351 Digital Video Production II (formerly Videolab II)

M450 Media Consumers

M450 Do Films Make Arguments?

M450 Film Noir

M491 Independent Studies

- Oral History: "Ker Family Flees the Khmer Rouge"

- Career Study Off Campus: Campus Radio Stations

- Advanced Video Production: *A Few Moments Short*

M100B Independent Film (January Term)

C/I (Freshman Seminar) Censorship and Expression in American Culture

Indiana University, 1998-2004 (Associate Instructor)

C121 Public Speaking

C190 Introduction to Media Studies

C223 Business and Professional Communication

C335 Production as Criticism: Crime Genre

C360 Basic Film Production

**CONFERENCE
PARTICIPATION**

Participant, FLOW Conference, October 2006, Austin, TX
Presentation, "What Is Fiction, What Is Real? Encouraging Identification in *The West Wing*'s Production of Political and Emotional Realism," Film and History Conference, November 2006, Dallas, TX
Participant, Austin College Asian Studies Seminar, May 2005
Participant, NITLE Digital Gaming Seminar, July 2005
Paper, "Weary Escapism and Quality Fantasy: Politics, Viewers, and *The West Wing*," National Communication Association, November 2003, Miami, FL
Panel Participant, "Prime-Time Politics: *The West Wing*, the Presidency, and U.S. Political Culture" National Communication Association, November 2003, Miami, FL
Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) Conference, March 2002, Phoenix, AZ
PFF Conference, February 2002, Bloomington, IN
Visual Rhetoric Conference, September 2001, Bloomington, IN
Preparing Future Faculty Conference, April 2001, Bloomington, IN

SERVICE

Austin College

Programmer, Promoter, 1st and 2nd Annual Austin College Student Film Festival, 2005-2006
Producer, Videographer, Physics Faculty Audition Video, 2005
Presenter, Staff Service Day, 2005
Member, Presidential Scholarship Committee, 2005-2006
Member, Faculty Search Committee: Theater, 2004-2005

Indiana University

Department of Communication and Culture Peer Mentor, 2001-2004
Department of Communication and Culture Equipment and Technology Committee, 2001-2004
City Lights Film Series Board, 2001-2004
City Lights Technology Coordinator, 2001-2004
Webmaster, City Lights Website, 2001-2004
Webmaster, Graduate Orientation Website, 2001-2004
Photographer, IU Preparing Future Faculty Brochure, 2002
Judge, Brian Friedman Student Film Competition, 2000
CMCL Graduate Orientation Panel Member, 2000-2001

**RELEVANT
WORK
EXPERIENCE**

Freelance Production Assistant, Washington, D.C., 2001
South Bend, IN, 1997-1998
New York City, NY, 1996-1997
Media Archivist, Photographic Division, Notre Dame, IN, 1995-1996
News Production Intern, WNDU Television, South Bend, IN, 1995
Public Relations Intern, University Public Relations Office, Notre
Dame, IN, 1994

AWARDS

Humanities Division Excellence in Teaching Award, 2006

GRANTS

Competitive Travel Grant for 2003 NCA Participation
Five travel grants for Preparing Future Faculty Site Visits, 2001-2003

**PROFESSIONAL
MEMBERSHIPS**

National Communication Association, 2002-2004, 2006-present
Society for Cinema and Media Studies, 2002-2005